

Habitat Herald

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THE AMPHIBIANS OF JK BLACK OAK

Article and Photos
by Jenny Erickson



Gray Treefrog



Amphibians, consisting in our area of frogs, toads, salamanders, and newts, are an extremely important part of the ecosystem. They are a food source to a broad range of animals including other amphibians, reptiles, birds, small mammals, and larger mammals. In addition to being an integral part of the food chain, they are also an important indicator of the health of a local ecosystem. The skin of an amphibian is permeable to water and oxygen, and also contains many glands that produce mucous to keep the skin moist. Due to the permeable nature of their skin, amphibians can absorb toxins from the air and water. Monitoring their populations is vital to monitoring the health of an environment and the stability of the amphibian populations.

In This Issue

Executive Director's Message	2
Protecting Bles Park's Wild Habitat	3
4,259 Butterflies Counted!	6
Connecting Children to Nature	7
Making a Difference at Ball's Bluff	8
Resources for Home Habitat Supporters	10
Join Our Christmas Bird Count	11
Programs & Field Trips	14

Vernal pools are an extremely important but often overlooked part of our ecosystem, often completely unnoticed until the winter rains and thawing snow begin to fill these natural depressions in the forest floor. Vernal pools are temporary pools that do not contain any fish and dry up as the weather warms and the amount of rain decreases. These are crucial habitats for our local amphibians. As we are losing our forested areas, we are also losing these vernal pools, which leads to declines in local amphibian populations. Because our amphibians are

in a national (and worldwide) decline, it is important that we monitor changes in the populations so we can proactively help protect the ecosystems they need to survive.

The vernal pools at the JK Black Oak Wildlife Sanctuary offer our local amphibians an optimal habitat for breeding, and a haven for them as they develop into adulthood. In March 2021, Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy started the first year of a continuing population survey of the amphibians living and breeding in and around the vernal

pools of JK Black Oak. This ongoing survey will allow us to monitor the amphibians and track fluctuations in the numbers of amphibians.

JK Black Oak contains 13 vernal pools on the property. Approximately half of the vernal pools dried up fairly quickly due to the lack of rain in the early spring. Since they dried up so early in the season, they were not able to support breeding and developing amphibians. Most of the pools that dried up were also lacking tree cover,

Continued on page 4



Executive Director's Message



Between August and November it always feels like so much happens. The heat and humidity of summer gives way to the cooler temperatures of fall, and the end of the year is knocking on our doorstep. From our Butterfly Count to our Fall Native Plant Sale to stream monitoring to witnessing fall bird migration during our

monthly bird walks, we have hosted a lot of programs as well.

We also just wrapped up our first Walk for Wildlife. We are thoroughly impressed by the amount of participation and engagement we've had during the past month. We hope that our participants had as much fun as we did getting out in nature, logging miles, recording species, and raising funds. Thank you to everyone who participated!

While we have enjoyed many successes this year, and we have been able to host more in-person programs, the pandemic continues to make it a challenge to do so, and many events we hoped to have never came to fruition. Thankfully, our members remain dedicated to our mission to positively impact our community and contribute to our efforts.

Your support helps secure our organization's future as we continue to grow and evolve in our provision of high-quality programming that inspires and motivates people to be engaged as active participants to make Loudoun a better place for people and wildlife. You can help us reach our 2021 goals so we can hit the ground running next year. And remember, #GivingTuesday is right around the corner on November 30.

We hope that you and your loved ones have a happy, safe, and healthy holiday season. Thank you for investing in Loudoun Wildlife.

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.

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County Supervisors To Weigh Bles Park Changes

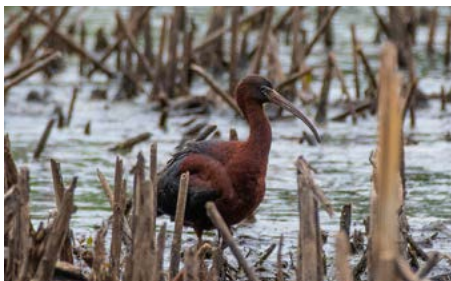
Planning Commission Heeds Public's Call to Protect Habitat

by Michael Myers, Executive Director

On October 14, the Loudoun Planning Commission voted 5-2-2 (two commissioners were absent) to deny the Bles Park "enhancements" application. But the final decision is up to the Board of Supervisors, who likely will take up the issue during its December 15 public hearing.

While planning commissioners applauded the Parks, Recreation, and Community Services (PRCS) department for making modifications to reduce the impact to the natural resources at Bles, the majority agreed that the proposal does not do enough to balance the protection of natural resources and the needs for active recreation and greater park amenities. They heard the community's concerns for impacts to the natural resources loud and clear, and they are protecting them for the benefit of the community.

Commissioners expressed that this application "screams for less, not more" amenities, that "proceeding with caution would not be cautious enough" to protect the natural resources, and the efforts that have been made are too small to protect Bles Park's unique environmental benefits and natural assets. However, multiple commissioners said there are alternatives and solutions that would protect the natural assets while providing park amenities the community needs, and they hope alternatives will be sought and this application further modified before it goes to the Board of Supervisors. We wholeheartedly agree with the Planning Commission, and we will continue to urge further modifications to this proposal.



Birders often spot rarely-seen-in-Loudoun species, like this Glossy Ibis, at Bles Park. Photo by Michael Sciortino

What Can You Do?

Now is the time for the community to speak up and voice their concerns to the Board of Supervisors since it is their decision to approve or deny this application. We encourage members of the public to write to their supervisor, and/or the entire board, to let them know that the existing wildlife habitat at Bles Park should be protected. Your voice matters and makes a difference!

The Planning Commission included four main reasons in their findings for denial of this application:

1. The application proposal is contrary to the Loudoun County 2019 General Plan policies that call for the protection of natural, environmental, and heritage resources.
2. The proposed increase in impervious surfaces, structures, and development at Bles Park would destroy habitats for rare and sensitive plant and animal species, and species of greatest concern.
3. The application proposal puts exemplary natural communities and ecosystems at increased and unnecessary risk.
4. There are alternative solutions to locate appropriate amenities and additions outside of the floodplain and/or away from sensitive habitat areas, so as to safeguard the natural resources, wildlife habitat, and environmental community benefits in Bles Park that exist nowhere else in the county, much less eastern Loudoun, and are irreplaceable for our residents.

While the staff report notes that this application generally complies with the 2019 Comprehensive Plan, it is not compatible with natural heritage resource policies to protect areas of natural biodiversity. Bles Park is one of Loudoun's top places in terms of bird biodiversity, with numerous shy, sensitive, and reclusive bird species. Other species of concern for the state of Virginia are found at Bles Park every year. The natural areas are excellent habitat for dragonflies, pollinators, aquatic mammals, and other species. This exemplary wildlife habitat should be protected, not destroyed.

The PRCS department did remove the proposed maintenance facility from its proposal, relocated the pickleball/tennis courts to the proposed parking lot area, and reduced the unprogrammed lawn area by 57%. However, the proposal still seeks to:

- Build a boardwalk through a sensitive wetland;
- Allow vehicular access alongside the sensitive wetland;
- Create an unnecessary "unprogrammed lawn area" that would destroy forest and pollinator habitat; and
- Expand the paved parking area in a floodplain.

Loudoun Wildlife's suggested modifications include:

- Eliminate the boardwalk through the most sensitive area of the park, and instead install observation platforms at strategic locations at the edge of the wetlands. The application references other boardwalks in parks in the Northern Virginia region such as those at Huntley Meadows (1,500 acres), a park more than ten times the size of Bles Park (132 acres). This unnecessary amenity would drive away the wildlife it seeks to connect people with.
- Do not allow vehicular traffic along the edge of the wetlands, but require kayak users to use carts to wheel their kayaks to the newly proposed kayak launch. This inconvenience is necessary to protect the sensitive wetlands from noise and traffic. The current path is used frequently by hikers, runners, walkers, and other user groups, and it would create unnecessary conflicts and safety risks. We also support alternate locations for the kayak launch as proposed by the commissioners, which were dismissed.
- While the unprogrammed lawn area was reduced, it should be removed altogether. It is unnecessary and it would destroy mature trees and pollinator habitat currently existing at that location.
- While the number of parking spaces were reduced (to accommodate the pickleball/tennis court in the parking area), the amount of parking requested is still excessive. We recognize that there are overflow parking concerns on weekends when soccer games are held. However, the parking issue stems from a lack of residential parking for the neighboring community, which has resulted in residents

Continued on page 5



The Amphibians of JK Black Oak, continued from page 1

which made them more susceptible to early drying. Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy Habitat Restoration volunteers are working diligently to rebuild those areas that lack the needed tree cover. The remaining vernal pools proved to be quite productive, retaining water for a long enough period to support developing amphibian life, plus a surprise or two as well.

These species were observed at JK Black Oak after the first year of monitoring the populations:

JEFFERSON SALAMANDER

(*Ambystoma jeffersonianum*)

Our most exciting surprise this past year was a healthy breeding population of Jefferson Salamanders. These salamanders are approximately 5-7 inches in length and are a light-dark gray with light colored flecks on the sides. Jefferson Salamander adults were observed in four of the vernal pools, and we recorded 47 egg masses in these four pools. The Jefferson Salamander has a Virginia Wildlife Action Plan Rating of Tier IV, which means that the species may be rare, especially on the periphery of their range. Populations have demonstrated a significant decline, and long-term planning is required to stabilize or increase populations.



Jefferson Salamander and Jefferson Salamander egg mass

EASTERN RED-BACKED SALAMANDER

(*Plethodon cinereus*)

This little salamander was not one who utilized the vernal pools to lay eggs because, unlike many other amphibian species, they do not have an aquatic larval stage. The eggs are laid in dark, damp areas such as under rocks or rotting logs (which is where this one was found). They are fairly common in a damp woodland area.



WOOD FROG (*Lithobates sylvaticus*)

One of the earliest amphibians to emerge and begin breeding in the vernal pools is the Wood Frog. The Wood Frog, which often has a dark eye mask over each eye, has the distinction of being found well into the Arctic region. They hibernate over winter in a frozen state under a light layer of leaf litter. They have a natural "anti-freeze" that enables them to survive very cold temperatures and allows them to be the first to emerge in the late winter in many areas.



SPRING PEOPER

(*Pseudacris crucifer*)

As their name indicates, these small frogs start their breeding call in the early spring. Though they are only around an inch long, their calls can be quite loud. After breeding is complete, they return to the trees, where they rarely climb higher than three feet.



GRAY TREEFROG (*Hyla versicolor*)

This little tree frog, approximately 2 inches in length, can alter its skin color based on the surrounding conditions. Gray Treefrogs are quite elusive and can be challenging to locate until the beginning of breeding season (which can be lengthy, depending upon local weather conditions). The Gray Treefrogs migrate from the trees to the water at night for potential breeding and return to the trees in the late night, usually around 11:00 pm–1:00 am.

GREEN FROG (*Lithobates clamitans*)

The Green Frog is one of our larger frogs, 3-4 inches in length, and is often mistaken for a bullfrog. Although a Green Frog and a young bullfrog can be very similar in appearance, the Green Frog has dorsolateral ridges (ridges on either side of the back that run down the length of the body) and a more pointed snout than the bullfrog. The Green Frog lives in and around water and gives a call that sounds like a banjo string.

AMERICAN TOAD (*Anaxyrus americanus*)

The American Toad is one of the two true toads that we have in our area, the other being the Fowler's Toad. (There is also the Eastern Spadefoot (*Scaphiopus holbrookii*), which is a primitive frog though it is often referred to as a toad.) The American Toad is a common resident in our area and, much like our other amphibians is around water only during breeding season. They lay eggs in long strands attached to vegetation, and the eggs can hatch relatively quickly.

PICKEREL FROG (*Lithobates palustris*)

Though we did not observe any breeding activity with the Pickerel Frog, it was very exciting to see this often elusive, medium-sized frog during one of our Amphibian Night walks at JK Black Oak.

FAIRY SHRIMP (*Eubranchipus vernalis*)

These obviously are not amphibians, but we observed a healthy population of Fairy Shrimp in the majority of the vernal pools. What are Fairy Shrimp? They are related to the brine shrimp (probably most familiar as the "Sea Monkeys" we bought as children) only they are freshwater shrimp and live in vernal pools. They have a relatively short lifespan, living only for one season, but are prolific breeders whose eggs can lay dormant in the leaf litter of a vernal pool until conditions are right for hatching. They emerge in the winter in our area when the vernal pools fill with water, and are a favorite food source of our visiting Wood Ducks (who transport the Fairy Shrimp to new locations through their feces). Our local Fairy Shrimp are more commonly seen in the late winter through the mid-spring in the vernal pools, but since we experienced an extremely high amount of precipitation in June we also observed a later emergence of them at the end of June/ beginning of July, which was a real treat!



As the Amphibian program grows, so will our programs, which will soon include reptiles as well as amphibians. Please contact Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy for information regarding this and any of our other programs.

Jenny Erickson is Loudoun Wildlife's Amphibian Monitoring Coordinator.

Due to the environmentally sensitive habitat and rare species, JK Black Oak is not open for general public access, and we can only accommodate registered participants.

Conservation Advocacy: Bles Park, continued from page 3

and commercial vehicles being parked on the street adjacent to Bles Park – where overflow parking for soccer games should be – outside of the floodplain along the street. Additional parking solutions should be outside of the floodplain.

Furthermore, Loudoun Wildlife supports the Planning Commission's follow-up motion to:

1. Pursue an initiative to develop expertise in wildlife biology, natural ecosystems, and native plant and animal communities.
2. Pursue the opportunities uncovered and developed during this application process including alternative parking solutions, an alternative for the boardwalk, an alternative kayak launch location at Bles Park, and construction of proposed active recreational amenities at other close-by locations.

This application has underscored the need for the county to include more expertise throughout the planning process to adequately balance protecting our natural ecosystems and native plant and animal communities, especially at exemplary wildlife habitats such as those at Bles Park, while providing needed park amenities. We applaud the Planning Commission for bringing this topic to the forefront.

Good Advocacy News

On other advocacy fronts, we have good news to share. The Board of Supervisors **denied the proposed AT&T Monopole atop Short Hill Mountain**. Their action upholds the 2019 Comprehensive Plan and Telecommunications Plan policies to protect the ridgelines in Loudoun County. We applaud the supervisors for choosing to seek better solutions to fulfill a need for county residents without sacrificing the views and rural character that attract people and wildlife to western Loudoun.



The online poll on the potential Route 15 North bypass options around Lucketts showed overwhelming public support to protect the globally rare wetlands at JK Black Oak Wildlife Sanctuary. This was one of many steps in this process. We expect the Planning Commission to take up this matter at its November 30 public hearing, which would likely put it before the Board of Supervisors in January or February. Please check our website for updates and to learn how to contact the Planning Commission.

Loudoun Wildlife is excited to announce that Joe and Karen Coleman have pledged to donate \$25,000 in hopes that the Loudoun Wildlife community will match their **gift to support Loudoun Wildlife hiring a conservation advocacy specialist**. Having a paid staff position will elevate our capacity to respond to threats, challenges, and impacts to our green infrastructure such as the applications described in this article. See more details on this fundraising campaign on our website.



Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy's 25th Annual Butterfly Count

4,259 reasons to love hot weather

by Anne Ellis, Butterfly Count Coordinator

This year marked Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy's 25th Annual Butterfly Count. Twelve teams were deployed throughout the count circle to peer into every bush and roadside ditch, scrutinize every blossom they could find, peek around trees and buildings and stroll through lush plantings in search of our favorite insect.

Prior to the count many of us thought that we were seeing fewer butterflies than usual. However, the count data shows that butterfly flight was above average this year. We counted 4,259 butterflies in 48 species.

The five-year average is 3,683 butterflies and 48 species. A Giant Swallowtail (*Papilio cresphontes*) sighted by the Purcellville Team was a clear highlight. We have seen this species just four other times.

With numbers like this, why do we feel like there are not as many butterflies as there used to be? Could our concerns about climate change be influencing our perceptions? The worrisome news of catastrophic loss of insects worldwide? Massive habitat loss? Our data doesn't seem to support such concern. Perhaps there are other, more local factors that might influence our perception of butterfly populations.

Let's start with who is looking: a casual observer is looking for colorful fluttering around pretty flowers. A gardener who is more concerned with what's eating precious plants may suspect caterpillars (baby butterflies) are the culprits. A lepidopterist, in focusing on a particular species, may overlook others. The big, showy Eastern Tiger Swallowtail, the busy and populous Cabbage White, and the more subtle Zabulon Skipper are all well represented in the data.

Perhaps it is when and where we look: many garden-worthy natives, such as monarda and milkweed, were already out of season by the time of the count, and a

butterfly magnet like Common Thistle is usually weeded out of garden areas. In fact, many butterflies prefer those weedy patches and roadside ditches. Areas like this are often mowed according to a schedule based on human, not butterfly, requirements.

Time of day, time of year and general weather conditions all impact butterfly flight patterns. If spring is delayed or early, caterpillar growth may be faster or slower (warm weather = speedy development). The result is slightly earlier or later flight of adult butterflies. Windy, cold, rainy weather drives them into hiding. Butterfly time is hot, sunny, humid, and not too breezy. If the weather does not cooperate on the day you happen to be making observations, the results may be disappointing.

If you want to see butterflies, you must brave our typical summer weather, especially in August. And we invite you to do just that: the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy's 26th Annual Butterfly Count will be on August 6, 2022. Please join us!



Giant Swallowtail butterfly
Photo by Lisa McKew



Male Zabulon Skipper butterfly
Photo by John Ellis



How Our Communities Can Connect Children to Nature

by Meghan Goldman, Youth and Family Program Coordinator



Charlie Tierney, Abby Mae Edwards, Kate Weller, Belle Ours, and Max Ours cross a stream at the Chapman DeMary Trail during a 2019 playdate led by Loudoun Wildlife and Purcellville Parks and Recreation. Photo by Amie Ware/Purcellville Parks and Recreation

In Grand Rapids, Mich., public schools, every eighth grader gets a chance to put on a life jacket and learn how to canoe. Throughout the city, children are busy planting tree saplings in neighborhoods without a full tree canopy, and they're also designing a green schoolyard play area using downed tree stumps. These efforts are all part of the city's coordinated strategy to connect children to nature.

Grand Rapids is just one of many communities across the U.S. acting on research that nature makes kids healthier, smarter, and happier. In Rochester, N.Y., the city adopted a Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights, and committed to building an urban nature center. The city of Austin, Texas, has installed several new green schoolyards, and also launched a Nature-Smart Library initiative.

As communities across Loudoun continue to embrace sustainable growth and environmental stewardship, there are many opportunities to incorporate policies, programs, and green infrastructure that can connect kids to the natural world.



Green Schoolyards

Already commonplace in other countries, as well as a growing number of U.S. cities, green schoolyards replace asphalt and turf lawns with nature-filled places for students, teachers, parents, and community members to play, learn, explore, and grow. Elements can include outdoor classrooms, native landscapes, nature play features, stormwater capture, trails, and trees.

Outside of school hours, these schoolyards become a convenient way for neighborhood residents to both access and connect with nature. Adding natural elements to school grounds is also a great opportunity to create a shared sense of ownership with the surrounding community, by engaging nearby residents in the design and stewardship of the space.



Making Parks Inviting to All

Even though Loudoun may have an abundance of green space throughout the county, it's important

to understand whether children — and which children — can actually have meaningful nature experiences. A close look at use patterns and accessibility barriers can uncover deficits that need to be addressed.

Some potential strategies to increase children's connection to nature could include building a youth steward program. By training and enlisting local youth in park stewardship activities, teens are able to engage with nature in a new and meaningful way. They would also be able to help guide adults in creating relevant programming for their peers.

Teens with an interest in environmental issues could also be recruited, trained, and employed to lead summer nature activities for younger children through various community parks.

Lastly, park staff can be given training and funding to offer more culturally relevant programming and communications to families of color.



Continued on page 12



Making a Difference at Ball's Bluff

Volunteers Take On Park's Invasive Garlic Mustard

by BJ Lecrone, Office Management/Online Outreach

While COVID-19 stalled many events worldwide in April 2020, Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy staff was able to join John DeMary on a spring ephemerals walk at Ball's Bluff Battlefield Regional Park in Leesburg. I was amazed by the beauty of the spring ephemerals (the first plants to emerge in spring and the first to flower), but I was also disturbed by the overwhelming amount of Garlic Mustard challenging them. As a Virginia Master Naturalist, I'm increasingly aware of the problems non-native plants can cause. Garlic Mustard (*Alliaria petiolata*) is allelopathic in that it changes the soil chemistry around its roots in a way that displaces natives, allowing the seeds of Garlic Mustard to continue to spread. We believe that each year Garlic Mustard is pulled will improve the soil and decrease the seed bank, so that there will be far fewer plants to deal with in the future.

In the fall of 2020, I was moved by an idea that perhaps a group of us could make a difference at Ball's Bluff. I took on this project as a Virginia Master Naturalist volunteer and advertised through Loudoun Wildlife's social media. NOVA Parks staff were supportive of the help, and it was fairly easy to gather interest. As I coordinated the group of 20 volunteers and winter progressed, many doubts and insecurities arose in my mind. Who would hang in there with me and continue to be inspired to make a difference? How do I show people the difference between Garlic Mustard and the natives, to protect the natives from being pulled by mistake? Could I keep up the pace as the leader of the group for six to eight weeks? Are we starting too early? It's going to be cold! Then March 4 arrived and it was time to take the leap.

I and many others experienced a transformational sense of connection to nature and our team. There were individuals who did hang in there with me week after week, working hard and learning, and a few key people then ventured out on their own with friends who understand the problem with Garlic Mustard. Ame Persaud, in particular, concentrated on areas that weren't even in my original scope. This brought all of us to a total of three park areas to remove Garlic Mustard and explore the native ephemerals and wildlife.



Garlic Mustard in bloom.

Photo by Liam McGranaghan



It was during a walk at Ball's Bluff, led by John DeMary, that the author became inspired to do something about the Garlic Mustard problem there.

Photo by BJ Lecrone



Volunteer Ame Persaud holds a freshly pulled Garlic Mustard monster.
Photo by BJ Lecrone



We learned many lessons:

- Starting early is important! Garlic Mustard starts growing early, even before the spring ephemerals are emerging, so starting early means less damage to the precious natives we are trying to save.
- Each invasive plant removed, no matter how small, makes an impact on the future because millions of seeds from the removed plants never get a chance to fall into the soil seed bank.
- Don't wait until April when they are large and overwhelming because you will give up!
- Spread the word! People walking the trails learned from us as we pulled and told them the story of our mission.

Each week we gathered, pulled, and bagged. Scientific reports (cited by Blue Ridge PRISM and [Invasive.org](https://www.invasive.org) in their Garlic Mustard fact sheets) have indicated that removing the plant reduces the allelopathic chemicals it secretes, which have a negative effect on neighboring plants from the area. As each week progressed the bags became heavier and heavier. I created videos capturing what was in bloom and what could

be mistaken for Garlic Mustard. Even volunteers who couldn't make it a particular week could learn from the transformation of this gorgeous natural area after two months. Each week we enjoyed seeing different species of special native spring ephemerals while we waited for the Virginia Bluebells (*Mertensia virginica*) to emerge. My final spring walk on April 29 featured beautiful white blooms of Sweet Cicely (*Myrrhis odorata*). Garlic Mustard towering over the forest floor was not the focal point for the first time in years.

By the end of April I was hooked on the beauty of this special place. The magical time was over as the green trees filled in a lush forest. Take a few moments to see the transformation on our YouTube [playlist](#) that I shared with our group and reflect how even the small things like pulling a forest thug such as Garlic Mustard can make a big difference. Can you be a part of the next Ball's Bluff Garlic Mustard experience in 2022? I'd like to coordinate a group of experts and beginners to continue to help Ball's Bluff. Fill in the form at https://secure.lglforms.com/form_engine/s/9X89Mjz6HvCCibz0IFoOyg if you can help lead as an expert or a beginner.

Resources:

Blue Ridge PRISM – "Rampant and Most Feared Invasive Garlic Mustard": <https://blueridgeprism.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Garlic-Mustard-Factsheet-2021-9-9-v1-FINAL.pdf>

Garlic Mustard fact sheet on [Invasive.org](https://www.invasive.org/eastern/midatlantic/alpe.html): <https://www.invasive.org/eastern/midatlantic/alpe.html>

YouTube playlist, Ball's Bluff Garlic Mustard Pull: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLDhKd5IFs9Ptx9iLA6cRVjHqoYITQ28QQ>



Author BJ Lechrone enjoys the beauty of Ball's Bluff's Virginia Bluebells.
Photo by Nancy Hwa



Bob Saveland pulls Garlic Mustard on a hillside.
Photo by BJ Lechrone



Volunteers spotted this Barred Owl watching their progress during one visit to remove invasive plants.
Photo by Nancy Hwa



Want to Support Healthy Wildlife Habitat in Your Yard? Resources Abound!

by Anne Owen, Audubon at Home Coordinator

Having worked with Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy's Audubon at Home (AAH) program for several years, I am very impressed with the range of great resources that are available here in Loudoun County for residents who want to steward their property in ways that support wildlife.

Loudoun Wildlife's trained volunteer AAH Ambassadors visit property owners and help provide information and practical recommendations to get started on establishing and nurturing healthy habitat for native wildlife on every scale, from container gardens, townhouse yards, and front lawn meadows to multi-acre properties that can accommodate larger meadows and forest. The AAH approach focuses on the three things that wildlife needs to thrive — water, food, and shelter, both for protection and to raise young, providing these things throughout the year, to support all life-cycle stages. A large focus area for us is advocating for native plants. Our Ambassadors are all either Virginia Master Naturalists or Master Gardeners, and have a wealth of excellent reference materials that we can pass along. With the wide range of properties here in Loudoun, it is always good to know where we can turn for information and in-depth support on specific challenges.



For native plant know-how in our area, it is hard to beat the outstanding **Plant NOVA Natives** website. It has an extensive list of topics of interest, including where to buy insecticide-free native plants locally, landscapers who work with native plants, hints and tips for creating habitat and suggested solutions for many common landscaping headaches, such as deer browse and invasive plant management. "Spread the Word" has resources for anyone who wants to influence friends or neighbors, and there is even a section to help landscaping professionals who are new to using native plants. For anyone who is focused on using only plants that are native to Loudoun County (rather than more broadly to Northern Virginia), the online Digital Atlas of the Virginia Flora will let you know if a particular plant is native, introduced, or absent from each county.



The Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE)

Loudoun County Master Gardeners offer several programs that can supplement an Audubon at Home visit. While we would love to see lawns eliminated, we know that is usually not practical! The Healthy

Virginia Lawns program will help you manage your turf in an environmentally safe manner to help reduce excess nutrients in ground and surface water run-off, ultimately protecting local waterways including the Chesapeake Bay. VCE Loudoun Master Gardeners who have qualified as Tree and Water Stewards provide education to the community on the benefits and proper planting and care of trees, promoting the social, economic, and mental health benefits of planting trees and tree care and supporting these types of projects that benefit the residents of the county. They will visit individuals and larger groups, including HOAs. Finally, the Master Gardeners also offer site visits to assess your pond, stream, or any area suffering erosion and will provide recommendations to maintain your landscape and a healthy ecosystem.



Virginia's Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCD) offers the Virginia

Conservation Assistance Program (VCAP), an urban cost-share program that provides financial incentives and technical and educational assistance to property owners installing eligible Best Management Practices to manage problems like erosion, excess impervious surfaces, and poor vegetation, thereby helping to improve regional water quality. SWCD staff will visit your property to help determine which best practice is the best fit and provide technical resources to help you design a plan that you can submit for a cost-sharing grant.



Many properties in Loudoun County have woodland, and landowners can reach out to the **Virginia Department of Forestry (VDOF)** for support. VDOF employs a network of professional foresters who work across the state assisting landowners in managing their forestland to meet their short-term and long-term goals and objectives. VDOF foresters can help landowners learn about their forestland and natural resources, and they can prepare management plans with recommended practices. They also can help landowners apply for federal and state cost-share assistance programs and identify insect and disease problems that can affect the health of the forest. And when the landowner is ready to act, VDOF foresters can be available to provide lists of contractors who can implement the management practices. The service is open to property owners with only small amounts of woodland as well as those with more extensive forest.



The plight of pollinators is creating increased interest in growing native grassland and meadows. **The Clifton Institute**, a nonprofit based in Warrenton, now has a land management outreach associate who is available to visit local properties. Marie Norwood will provide advice about managing land for the benefit of native plants and animals, with an emphasis on wildflower meadows and grassland restoration. Every landscape

is different, and every landowner has different goals. The Clifton Institute is pleased to now be able to give advice that is tailored to individual properties.

With resources like these, in addition to the wonderful staff at our area's native plant nurseries, there has never been a better time to create and enrich healthy habitat to sustain our native wildlife!



You can find all these resources here:

- Audubon at Home: <https://loudounwildlife.org/habitat-conservation/audubon-at-home/>
- Plant NOVA Natives: <https://www.plantnovanatives.org/>
- Digital Atlas of the Virginia Flora: <http://vaplantatlas.org/>
- Loudoun County Master Gardeners: <https://loudouncountymastergardeners.org/>
- Virginia Conservation Assistance Program: <https://vaswcd.org/vcap>
- Virginia Department of Forestry: <https://dof.virginia.gov/forest-management-health/landowner-assistance/find-a-forester/>
- The Clifton Institute: <https://cliftoninstitute.org/restoration/>

Join Us Dec. 28 for Central Loudoun's Christmas Bird Count

by Joe Coleman, Birding Coordinator



Highlights of the December 2020 Christmas Bird Count in Loudoun County included an Eastern Meadowlark. Photo by Michael Sciortino

Since 1899 thousands of people have participated in the world's longest-running citizen science project, the National Audubon Society's Annual Christmas Bird Count. This year, during 2,000 different counts, people will identify every wild bird they can find. The results are used to better understand bird populations and dynamics.

Join Loudoun Wildlife on Tuesday, December 28, as we count birds in the Central Loudoun Christmas Bird Count. Count circles have a 15-mile diameter covering 177 square miles. The Central Loudoun Count covers the county north to Waterford, south to Aldie, east to Ashburn, and west to Purcellville. In that area approximately 20 teams will explore the county's natural and not-so-natural areas in search of birds.

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

Everyone is welcome: beginners are teamed with experienced birders, and every eye and ear helps! Counters share their wonder of the wild beauty of feathered creatures with like-minded people and sometimes find truly rare birds. It is always lots of fun!

After the counting (and depending on COVID-19 conditions or possible restrictions) we may meet for a Tally Rally where we will find out what others found and share stories about the day's highlights. If you are interested in participating in the count for just a couple of hours or for the entire day, **Sign Up Online** by December 22 or contact Joe Coleman (jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org or 540-554-2542) or Bryan Henson (bhenson@loudounwildlife.org).



Connecting Children to Nature,
continued from page 7

Infusing Nature Connections

Many cities across the U.S. have begun infusing nature experiences into early education and afterschool programming. Both Seattle, Wash., and Austin, Texas, operate nature preschools through partnerships between early childhood education providers and parks departments.

Another great option is to provide professional development and training to afterschool program providers on how to lead more activities outdoors and how to integrate nature as part of core programming. These staff have the potential to infuse more nature experiences into programming for many children during the after-school, weekend, and summer hours.

Finally, parks departments can consider naturalizing some existing park areas with children's access and interests in mind, to promote the direct connection of children to nature.

Communities across the U.S. see bringing nature's benefits to children as an integral part of goals towards equity, community health, resiliency, park activation, youth engagement, and infrastructure. If you're interested in partnering with Loudoun Wildlife to bring any of these elements of nature connection to your community, please contact Meghan Goldman (mgoldman@loudounwildlife.org).

References:

- *Cities Connecting Children to Nature — Municipal Action Guide*, <https://www.nlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/CCCN-Municipal-Action-Guide-webready.pdf>
- "How the City of Grand Rapids Became a Leader in Connecting Children to Nature" by Alejandra Pallais — *National League of Cities*, <https://www.nlc.org/article/2020/11/24/how-the-city-of-grand-rapids-became-a-leader-in-connecting-children-to-nature/>

Volunteer of the Quarter: Janet Locklear

by Kim Strader, Volunteer Coordinator

This year we welcomed many new people as volunteers in all the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy programs. It is wonderful to see so many new faces help further our mission to inspire, educate, and motivate people to protect, preserve, and restore wildlife habitat. We would be remiss if we did not take a moment to acknowledge our veteran volunteers who have been with us for 10 years or more. It is thanks to these people that new volunteers are welcomed and made to feel a part of this community of like-minded folks who work to create a place where people and wildlife thrive.

Janet Locklear stands out among the crowd of our veteran volunteers this quarter for the roles she has filled and all the volunteers she has worked with in her 10-year tenure with Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy.

Janet is the trail leader on a Bluebird Nestbox Monitoring Trail and was the Bluebird Program Coordinator for five years. She is an Audubon at Home Ambassador, and her property has been a certified sanctuary for years. Janet was a Wild Shop volunteer, a previous Board member and vice president. She has reared Monarch caterpillars and helped with the Milkweed Sale. Recently Janet has helped survey native plants at JK Black Oak Sanctuary and marked plants in the east meadow area for relocation.

Janet's current role with Loudoun Wildlife is Native Plant Sale coordinator. She began training for this role in the fall of 2019 with plans for her to be fully in place for the Spring 2020 Sale. Midway through planning the Spring Sale, we had to cancel it due to COVID, which also ended up canceling the Fall 2020 Sale. With vaccinations and the hopes of returning to a "normal" life, the time came to start planning the Spring 2021 Sale. It quickly became apparent that we would have to make changes to ensure the sale would not become a "COVID super spreader event."

Planning for the Spring 2021 Sale was challenging. With many new procedures to implement and with COVID tensions running high, Janet did a wonderful job of communicating with our nurseries to make sure all their questions and concerns were addressed. With the help of Sheila Ferguson, the new sale layout was mapped to include a defined entrance, space for the nurseries to spread out so that customers could maintain six-foot distancing, along with multiple COVID stations and signs throughout the area with precaution reminders and supplies (face masks and hand sanitizer). Many thanks to Janet for leading this unprecedented effort to make the Spring 2021 Native Plant Sale a success. Thankfully, the Fall 2021 Sale was easier to plan, but it still would not have been possible without Janet's leadership.

From Bluebird Program coordinator to Plant Sale coordinator, Janet Locklear has done it all and worked with many volunteers in the process. As a volunteer leader, role model, and mentor, Janet exemplifies the Loudoun Wildlife vision of creating a place where people and wildlife thrive.





Book Review: *A World on the Wing* by Scott Weidensaul

Review by Steve Allen

Bird migration is a miracle, and the more we learn about it, the more miraculous it becomes. That is the central lesson of Scott Weidensaul's astonishing new book *A World on the Wing: The Global Odyssey of Migrating Birds*. Weidensaul, a longtime author and citizen-scientist focusing on birds and bird migration, takes us on an around-the-world journey following birds on their annual travels.

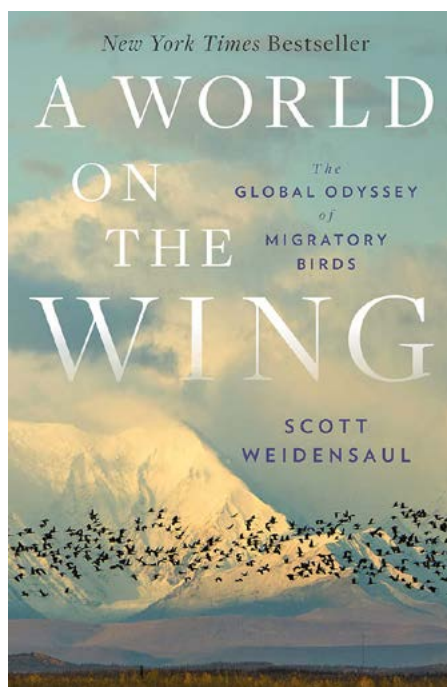
Some of the routes birds take are awe-inspiring. Until recently, scientists believed that the Arctic Tern had the longest migration route of any bird, travelling about 25,000 miles a year. But with the help of new tracking technology, it was discovered that Sooty Shearwaters nest in New Zealand and then migrate north along the western edge of the Pacific Ocean to the Arctic, where they spend the northern summer before flying down the western coasts of North and South America and then back to their nesting areas — a round trip totaling 46,000 miles!

That record didn't last long. With newly developed tracking devices attached, Arctic Terns reclaimed the top spot. One population of terns travel from summer nesting grounds in Iceland and Greenland down the coast of Europe to West Africa, across the Atlantic to Brazil, then south to Antarctica. Their return trip tracks up the southern African coast, then across the narrowest part of the Atlantic back to Brazil, then up the east coast of the U.S. to their nesting grounds. This round trip — basically a figure-8 on the entire Atlantic Ocean — totals 57,000 miles a year!

To accomplish these long-distance flights, birds undergo some shocking biological changes. As Weidensaul puts it, migrating birds "can grow and jettison their internal organs on an as-needed basis... and enjoy perfect health despite seasonably exhibiting all the signs of morbid obesity,

diabetes and looming heart disease."

It was well-known that many birds, including the Ruby-throated Hummingbird, double their weight, adding layers of fat before beginning long flights. It has now been discovered that birds with longer migration routes undergo even more extreme biological metamorphoses.



Bar-tailed Godwits do not eat during much of their long migration, causing their digestive organs to shrivel and stop working, while their wing muscles double in size and their hearts and lungs double their capacity to pump blood and air. This process then reverses itself when they arrive at their destination. When Red Knots are not at their nesting grounds, their reproductive organs shrink to almost nothing, and then regrow a thousand times larger when they are needed.

The driving force behind all these discoveries is technology, especially the miniaturization of tracking hardware. Fifteen years ago I was privileged to

witness an ornithologist trap a juvenile osprey and outfit it with a matchbook-sized, one-ounce (28-gram) transmitter. With the Arctic Tern weighing only a few ounces, and most songbirds less than one ounce, there was no way to track them then except by leg banding, a labor-intensive and hit-or-miss practice.

The last decade has seen a revolution in tracking technology. Transmitters called nanotags are now available that weigh only a fraction of a gram and can be used on the smallest birds, and even on large insects like Monarch butterflies. Nanotags broadcast a unique identification code that can be detected by receivers, some portable, some permanent and solar-powered, whenever the bird (or butterfly) comes within range.

Significant contributions to our knowledge of migration have also been made with the eBird online database. I routinely record lists from my bird walks, mostly for my own edification and to alert other birders to what's around, but I did not understand the contribution my lists make to migration science. As we record our bird walks, each species can be tracked on eBird so scientists can get a full picture of the timing and movement of that species' migration. This allows scientists to identify critical mid-migration stopping points that might need to be protected and conserved. I'm going to make an effort to record every migratory bird I see from now on.

There's much more in *A World on the Wing*, including the need to conserve coastal areas along the routes of long-distance shorebirds, and the threat to migrating birds from hunting. This is an important and informative book, and at the same time a very entertaining read. It should be required reading for everyone who loves birds.



Programs and Field Trips

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

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

Writing in Nature — First Thursdays: November 4, December 2, and January 6, 11:00 am – 12:30 pm, Gate House at Morven Park.

Join Nancy Morgan, Director Emeritus, Georgetown Lombardi Arts and Humanities Program, for this new monthly opportunity, presented by Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy, to enjoy the combined health benefits of time spent in nature and writing thoughts and feelings. Writing is often considered a solo, reflective practice, but writing in the company of others can be a supportive, community-building activity that encourages regular practice. Each session is a stand-alone event — come when you are able. Registration for each session is open through the morning of the workshop. **Registration required:** [Sign Up Online](#).

GivingTuesday — Tuesday, November 30. Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy is a membership-based, volunteer-driven, nonprofit organization committed to preserving, protecting, and restoring wildlife habitat in Loudoun. This year our organization is celebrating our 26th anniversary, and we accomplished some incredible feats thanks to the hard work, dedication, and determination of our members. You can help us inspire, motivate, and engage people in Loudoun to celebrate this milestone with us by spreading the word about #GivingTuesday. Your contributions support our education, citizen science, habitat conservation, and advocacy programs. #GivingTuesday is an online global movement that engages millions of participants worldwide to give back to causes they care about. This is your opportunity to give back and help us spread the word about our work to create healthy habitats for wildlife.

Birding the Dulles Greenway Wetlands — Saturday, December 4, and Sunday, January 23, 8:00 am. Join Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy for a bird walk at the Dulles Greenway Wetlands. Built in the early 1990s to replace wetlands lost when the Dulles Greenway was built, this wetlands along Goose Creek near Oatlands is a great place to observe a wide variety of birds, including small sparrows with their cryptic plumage, beautiful waterfowl, stately wading birds, and a magnificent pair of Bald Eagles who have successfully nested there for over a decade. **Expect to encounter rough terrain where walking is difficult.**

Limit 10. Registration required: [Sign Up Online](#) **Questions:** Contact Joe Coleman at 540-554-2542 or jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org.

Gate House Open House — Saturday, December 4, 1:00 – 4:00 pm, Gate House at Morven Park. Stop by Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy's office for some light snacks and fellowship. We'd love to get to know our members and hope you'll come and spend some time with Board President Julie Borneman, Executive Director Michael Myers, Board members, and other key volunteers. Come socialize and get a behind-the-scenes look at our operations!

A Banded or White-backed Garden Spider (*Argiope trifasciata*) enjoys an autumn day from its large web. Photo by Kim Strader



Meet Your Wildest Neighbors: Raptors of Virginia, Maryland, and DC — Tuesday, December 7, 7:00 pm, Rust Library.

It is thrilling to watch a Red-tailed Hawk soar beneath a bright blue sky or hear a Barred Owl call on a cold, clear night. Have you ever wondered where they live, what they eat, or how they raise their young? We invite you into the secret lives of these magnificent birds of prey. The personal stories of the live hawks, owls, and falcons who will be present will help you identify our native species, understand their valuable contribution to a healthy environment, and learn what we can do to provide for their welfare in the face of climate change and an increasingly human world — with good news, bad news, and a few surprises along the way. This program by certified raptor rehabilitator Liz Dennison is being jointly sponsored by Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy and the Loudoun County Public Library. **Questions:** Contact Joe Coleman at 540-554-2542 or jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org.

Dark Night Skies — Saturday, December 18, 6:00 - 8:00 pm, Location TBD. Dark night skies are essential for the health of humans, wildlife, and even plants. Join Geneviève de Messières, who has a PhD in astronomy from the University of Virginia, at this Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy presentation where we will explore the five principles of good outdoor lighting design and talk about how we can educate our neighbors and municipalities about the environmental and human health ramifications of stray light. Restoring the night sky is win-win, increasing the beauty of the area, saving energy, and reducing emissions which contribute to climate change. We'll finish the evening with stargazing, outdoors if weather permits, otherwise indoors using planetarium software on the projection screen. **Registration required:** [Sign Up Online](#).

Central Loudoun Christmas Bird Count — Tuesday, December 28.

Join Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy as we participate in the National Audubon Society's annual Christmas Bird Count. Our count circle has a 15-mile diameter and covers 177 square miles of Loudoun's countryside: north to Waterford, south to Aldie, east to Ashburn, and west to Purcellville. The count includes a number of Loudoun's very



special places such as Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve, Dulles Greenway Wetlands, Beaverdam Reservoir, Morven Park, Ball's Bluff, Waterford's Phillips Farm, some private estates, much of the still-rural western portions of the county, and in Maryland, about five miles of the C&O Canal around White's Ferry. Everyone is welcome; amateurs are teamed with experienced birders, and every eye and ear helps! Counters share their wonder of the wild beauty of feathered creatures with like-minded people and sometimes find truly rare birds. It is always lots of fun! After the counting and depending on COVID-19, we **may meet** for a Tally Rally where we will share stories of the day's highlights. If you are interested in participating in the count for just a couple of hours or for the entire day, [Sign Up Online](#) by December 22 or contact Joe Coleman (jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org or 540-554-2542) or Bryan Henson (bhenson@loudounwildlife.org).

What to See in Winter — Virtual program, Saturday, January 8, 5:00 – 6:00 pm; Winter Walk, Saturday, January 15, 1:00 – 2:00 pm, Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve. Join Jacob van Schilfgaarde, Virginia Master Naturalist and Facility Supervisor at Banshee Reeks, for a family-friendly Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy presentation on what to look for in winter. In the virtual program, he will discuss the wildlife that is still active in the area and different ways of recognizing their presence, as well as other ways to appreciate nature in winter; a winter walk will follow a week later. **Registration for both events is required:** [Sign Up Online](#).

Amphibian Monitoring Training Session — Saturday, January 15, 2:00 – 4:00 pm, Virtual. Frogs and toads are a vital part of our ecosystem and are considered indicator species. Fluctuations in their populations can give us vital information regarding the overall health of their habitat. Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy's amphibian monitoring program collects data that is compared over time to observe trends in populations and identify areas of population decline. Volunteers will monitor specific locations from February to September. During this training you will learn: the importance of monitoring frogs and toads; different amphibian habitats; identification of local frogs and toads; frog/toad monitoring protocols; and locating appropriate habitats for monitoring. The training session is required for participation in the FrogWatch Amphibian Monitoring program. **Registration required:** [Sign Up Online](#). **Questions:** Contact jswiggart@loudounwildlife.org.

Wildflower Talk — Saturday, January 22, 2:00 – 3:00 pm, Virtual. Ami Mason, Virginia master naturalist and resident gardener at Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve, will share photographs and expertise on native wildflowers on this Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy presentation. Ami will walk us through a year of wildflowers, beginning with the first spring ephemerals through the summer and autumn blooms. She will discuss the importance of wildlife relationships to the successional development of different flowers throughout the year. **Registration required:** [Sign Up Online](#).

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.

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:

Nov. 13, Dec. 11, and Jan. 8, 8:00 am

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 in a great mix of habitats. 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:

Nov. 21 and Jan. 16, 8:00 am



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:

Nov. 27 and Jan. 22, 8:00 am

"The web glistened in the light and made a pattern of loveliness and mystery like a delicate veil."

-E.B. White, Charlotte's Web



*People and Wildlife
Thrive Together*

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A Great Egret lands in the wetlands area of Bles Park. Photo by Michael Myers