Habitat Herald

A Publication of the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy

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Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy
Established 1995
Celebrating 30 Years

Standing Up for Wildlife by Preserving Habitat

by Joe Coleman, Birding Coordinator

Clockwise from top: Cardinal Ridge Elementary students gather for a Peterson Young Naturalist Program lesson; a red fox spotted in the wild; young summer nature campers embrace a tree; a Spring Peeper perches on a volunteer amphibian monitor's finger. *Photos from Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy archives*

In 1995, Loudoun County's population crossed the 100,000-person threshold. The Dulles Toll Road was close to completion, and development of the county was about to take off. Diane Gilliam (now Fetterman) had been meeting with some friends and neighbors about how to save the wildlife that still flourished in the county. On June 7, 1995, the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy held its first public meeting, at which Jocelyn Sladen gave a talk on how to create habitat for wildlife.

Recognizing that the greatest threat to wildlife worldwide is loss of healthy natural habitats, this small group of people wanted to find a way to protect what was so special in their community. As humankind expands its footprint and alters the face of the land, more and more habitat is lost. Sometimes that loss is obvious, as when we build a subdivision or a data center. Other times

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In This Issue

Executive Director's Message

Hello, Loudoun Wildlife family!

This special issue of the *Habitat Herald* celebrates 30 years of Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy, including a beautiful retrospective article written by Joe Coleman, one of our founders. What a difference Loudoun Wildlife has made in those 30 years, from countless education programs to impactful community science efforts; from leading the charge to make Banshee Reeks a thriving nature preserve to the purchase and protection of our JK Black Oak Wildlife Sanctuary; from community-led advocacy efforts that scored wins for our natural world to life-shaping outdoor learning experiences for our students.

All of those successes and more are a testament to the unbridled potential of what just a few people can do when they come together with passion and purpose to achieve a unified goal. Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy began around a kitchen table 30 years ago with three such people: Joe Coleman, Diane Gilliam, and Leslie Metzger. Today, we reach thousands every year as the largest, most comprehensive environmental organization in Loudoun County.

There's no better way to honor the work of the last 30 years than to build on it, and that's exactly what we're doing. Our staff, for example, is growing, including the recent hiring of our first director of education, a role designed to bring the proven benefits of nature-based learning to more Loudoun County students than ever.

Our events have been setting participation records over the past year, including our largest Birdathon in April/May, our largest annual meeting in June, and our biggest-ever Walk for Wildlife happening throughout October. Our community science programs lead the county in their ever-growing impact; our advocacy efforts continue to amplify the voices of our community; and our supportive network of passionate volunteers continues to grow, delivering more than 15,200 hours last year (another record).

There's so much to celebrate this anniversary year, but there's so much ahead of us, too. One crucial way you can help is to become a member or renew your membership today. Through our "300 for 30" campaign, we're committed to gaining 300 new or renewed members for Loudoun Wildlife by December 31. Help us get there by joining today or giving a membership as a gift! Members receive a variety of benefits, including early access to events and information, discounts at local businesses, and more. To add your name to the "300 for 30," visit https://loudounwildlife.org/join-renew/.

To all who've made the last 30 years possible and to those who'll shape the days to come... thank you!

Tom

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Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy is a 501c3 nonprofit organization. We protect, preserve, and restore wildlife habitat, shaping a Loudoun where people and wildlife thrive together. 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 Amy Ulland at aulland@loudounwildlife.org.

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Conservation Advocacy:

Luckett's Bypass Concerns Head Crowded Fall Agenda

by Trinity Mills, Conservation Advocacy Specialist

On October 8, the Loudoun County Department of Transportation and Capital Infrastructure and its contractor held a public meeting to announce their preferred route alternative for the Route 15 Lucketts Bypass. The routes proposed — 1 and 1a, both variations on the project's original Alternative 1 — would have significant impacts to JK Black Oak Wildlife Sanctuary, and Loudoun Wildlife remains firmly opposed to these routes.

We continue to stay closely involved with this process to do everything possible to prevent the construction of a roadway from negatively affecting the globally rare habitat at JK Black Oak. We invite you to join us in telling the county that these routes also don't work for the community (the results of the county's public input survey showed that over 60 percent of respondents said none of the proposed alignments would work) and ask them to reconsider the study. The issue will be coming before the Board of Supervisors in early 2026, and we'll need your support!

See the current campaigns page on our website (https://loudounwildlife.org/conservation-advocacy/current-campaigns/) for background information and details on what you can do to help protect the wildlife at Black Oak.

Power Projects: Mars to Golden

Virginia's State Corporation Commission (SCC) — which among other duties has regulatory authority over utilities —heard public testimony on the proposed routes for the Mars to Golden transmission line, the final segment in Dominion Energy's Loudoun Reliability Loop, during local hearings on September 18 and 29. Residents and representatives voiced their concerns about the current proposed routes, with many echoing our environmental concerns. Ahead of the SCC's December 15 ruling, we are closely following this issue and submitting comments advocating for the protection of Broad Run Stream Valley, which this project could detrimentally affect.

CPAM/ZOAM: Data Centers and Rural Uses

The county's plan for Phase 2 of the Data Center Comprehensive Plan and Zoning Ordinance Amendments (CPAM/ ZOAM) is to lay out more stringent standards for how new data centers in the county can operate following the discontinuation of by-right data centers with the passing of Phase 1 in February. The project plan for Phase 2 was approved by the Loudoun County Board of Supervisors in September.

The Western Loudoun Rural Uses CPAM/ ZOAM discussions are ongoing. Loudoun Wildlife gave input on the topic for the September 30 meeting about the Mountainside Overlay District. We opposed proposals that would increase the types of uses permitted on the mountainside and lead to increased clearing of mature forests. Find more details and read our comments on our website.

Active Recreation in the Floodplain?

At an October Board of Supervisors meeting, county supervisors were expected to consider a recommendation from the Zoning Ordinance Committee regarding adjustments to county policy about uses in the floodplain. A push from the development community to allow construction for active recreation (such as ballfields, including associated parking) in the floodplain came to a head in September when the committee proposed a study that would investigate the feasibility of allowing this construction.

Loudoun Wildlife is adamantly opposed to this proposition due to the damage it would cause to critical riparian corridors. At time of writing, we are still awaiting confirmation on when the public will be engaged on this issue.

Speak Up for Wildlife

Bats, butterflies, frogs, and other wildlife can't advocate for conserving their habitats, but you can!

Find out how to contact Loudoun County supervisors and their staffs here: https://loudounwildlife.org/2025/02/loudoun-supervisors-contacts/.

For updates on all of Loudoun Wildlife's current advocacy campaigns, visit https://loudounwildlife.org/conservation-advocacy/current-campaigns/.

Mist Netting at JK Black Oak Reveals Bat Diversity and Surprises

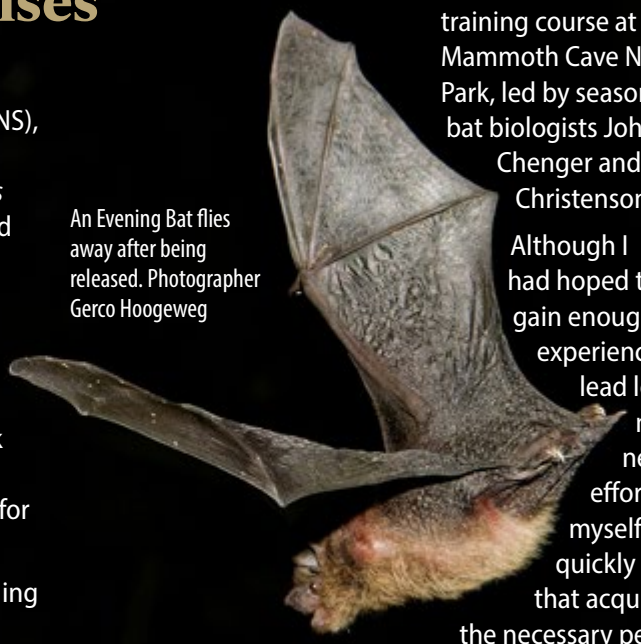
by Bruce Kimmel, JK Black Oak Bat Project Director

In 2021, the Virginia Master Naturalist Banshee Reeks Chapter launched an acoustic bat monitoring project, starting with a pilot study at Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve. By 2022, the project had expanded to 13 sites across Loudoun County and now includes 16 active monitoring locations — among them, Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy's JK Black Oak Wildlife Sanctuary.

Over the course of this effort, nine bat species have been consistently identified as frequent visitors to Loudoun County: Big Brown, Eastern Red, Evening, Free-tailed, Hoary, Little Brown, Northern Long-eared, Silver-haired, and Tri-colored Bats. From early on, it became clear how ecologically significant JK Black Oak is: it was the only site to record all nine of these species. Notably, it is also the only location where the federally and state endangered Northern Long-eared Bat was regularly detected throughout the year.

White-nose Syndrome (WNS), a disease caused by the fungus *Pseudogymnoascus destructans*, has devastated Northern Long-eared Bat populations across North America. The consistent acoustic detections of this species — alongside many others — at JK Black Oak underscore the vital importance of its habitats for regional bat conservation.

To deepen our understanding of how bats use the sanctuary and to confirm the presence of various species, Loudoun Wildlife received funding from Microsoft in collaboration with the Society for Ecological Restoration to conduct mist netting studies at JK Black Oak. In 2023, I had the opportunity to attend a mist netting training course at Mammoth Cave National Park, led by seasoned bat biologists John Chenger and Keith Christenson.



An Evening Bat flies away after being released. Photographer Gerco Hoogeweg

Although I had hoped to gain enough experience to lead local mist netting efforts myself, I quickly learned that acquiring the necessary permits can take years of field experience. Fortunately, my connection with Keith Christenson made it possible to establish a contract with him for this project. With over 30 years of field experience and more than 10,000 bats identified by species, Keith is one of the most respected bat biologists in the eastern U.S.

The mist netting study was permitted by the Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources and was conducted

Biologist checks the mist net at Big One vernal pool for captured bats. Photo by Gerco Hoogeweg

Bruce Kimmel checks the wing of an Eastern Red Bat for damage. Photo by Keith Christenson

Nana Chronger records bat biometric data during a mist netting night. Photo by Sheila Ferguson

on nine nights in April, May, and July 2025, following best practices to minimize the risk of WNS transmission. These months were strategically chosen to capture both spring migrants and summer residents. Prior to selecting net locations, we deployed additional acoustic recorders near three vernal pools at JK Black Oak— Big One, LaSabre, and Fairy Shrimp — to guide net placement based on bat activity. Recordings pointed us primarily to Big One and LaSabre, where Northern Long-eared calls were most frequently detected.

Across nine nights of netting, we captured and identified 68 bats: 37 Evening, 17 Big Brown, 11 Eastern Red, and 3 Silver-haired (14 in April, 19 in May, and 35 in July). Silver-haired Bats, a migratory species, were only captured in April. In July, more than half (54 percent) of the bats caught were juveniles. One Evening Bat showed significant wing damage, possibly due to WNS, and another was released immediately due to signs of mange.

Although we did not physically capture rarer species like the Northern Long-eared or Little Brown Bats, closer inspection of the acoustic recordings revealed that Northern Long-eared Bats were indeed present but between 2 am and 5 am, after the nets had been closed. Little Brown Bats were not acoustically detected on the netting nights.

Despite dry conditions in the vernal pools, the study provided valuable data. It showed that Evening Bats are the most common species at JK Black Oak and reaffirmed the sanctuary's role as a stopover for migrating Silver-haired Bats. The placement of acoustic recorders near Big One and LaSabre also revealed that Northern Long-eared Bats frequent wooded areas not picked up by our acoustic recorder in the field.

There were even a few lighthearted moments, such as getting stuck in the mud at LaSabre, exchanging bat stories, releasing a flying squirrel from a net, and watching one of the biologists take an unexpected plunge into the pool.

As we continue to monitor JK Black Oak, we're excited to see what future seasons will reveal about the county's most ecologically important bat habitat.

Plant Two Fall Keystone Plants, Not Mums

by BJ Lecrone, Wildlife Sanctuary Ambassador

Looking to add some fall-blooming flowers to your home this season? Don't plant that non-native chrysanthemum that has little value to insects. Focus your attention this fall on two types of colorful keystone native plants, asters (*Symphyotrichum spp.*) and goldenrods (*Solidago spp.*). They provide high-quality nectar and pollen for butterflies, native bees, wasps, and other insects. We call them keystone plants because they support a larger variety of insects than other plants, and just as important is that their leaves are food for a variety of moths and butterflies.

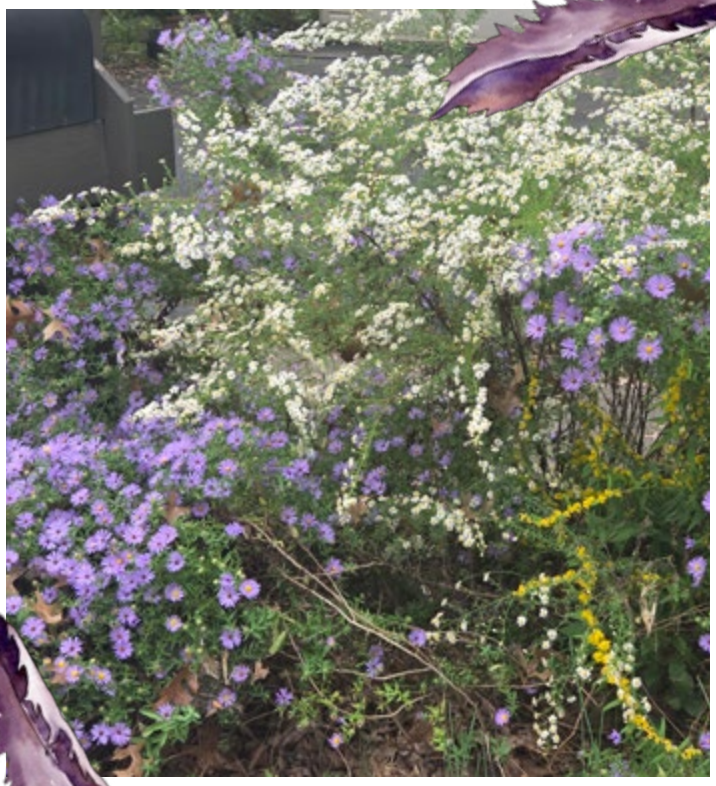
Like mums, Common Blue Wood Aster can shine in a container; shorter Aromatic Aster is tucked in at the bottom. Photo by BJ Lecrone

If you must purchase that non-native mum for a splash of color on your front porch, please also plant mixes of asters or goldenrod that will provide a feast for these late summer insects. Planting different types of goldenrod and asters will offer blooms at different times, extending the insects' food source even further.

A few other key points as we experience more drought in our region: With less rainfall, you may notice plants that wither and may die. You'll also notice plants that are surviving with less water will produce smaller flowers, less nutritious nectar and pollen, and fewer seeds. Water is a precious resource, but if you have the ability to water your plants, it will certainly improve the quality and quantity of your native asters and goldenrod for insects.

Plus, remember these native plants are part of the foodweb. Yes, you are providing insects a nourishing meal, but those insects may also be a meal for our year-round resident birds or migrating ones that are flying south for the winter.

Need advice about adding asters, goldenrods, or other native plants to your home landscape? Our Wildlife Sanctuary Program is here to help. To learn more, visit https://loudounwildlife.org/2016/12/wildlife-sanctuary-program/.



A variety of asters and goldenrods share the fall spotlight in this home mailbox planting. Photo by Melinda Soltys

Counting on You to Count Birds!

Join the Christmas Bird Count on Dec. 29

by Joe Coleman, Birding Activities Coordinator

Join this year's Christmas Bird Count, and you may be lucky enough to see a Barred Owl peering at you through light snow. We can't guarantee snow, or any particular species, but you'll definitely see birds! Photo by Bryan Henson

For well over a century, people have counted birds around Christmas in the world's longest-running community science project: the National Audubon Society's Annual Christmas Bird Count. This year, during 2,000 different counts targeting specific areas, people will count every wild bird they can find. The results will be used to better understand bird populations and dynamics.

Join Loudoun Wildlife on Monday, December 29, as we count birds in the Central Loudoun Christmas Bird Count circle. Count circles have a 15-mile diameter covering 177 square miles. This 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 natural and not-so-natural areas in search of birds.

The count includes many 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, several 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 makes a difference. 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!

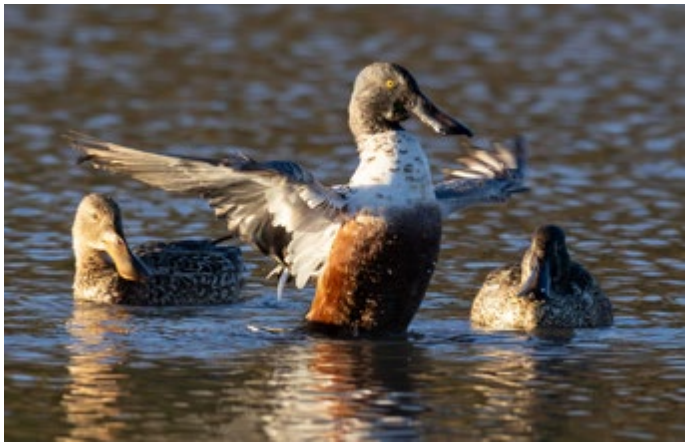
If you are interested in participating in the count for just a couple of hours or for the entire day, or at your feeders in your own backyard, sign up at https://loudounwildlife.org/citizen-science/bird-counts/christmas-bird-count/ by December 22 or contact Joe Coleman (jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org) or Bryan Henson (bhenson@loudounwildlife.org).

Join Neighboring Counts

Several other counts include parts of Loudoun County. If you can't make the Central Loudoun Christmas Bird Count or want to participate in more than one count, check these out:

- The **Seneca MD/VA** count on Sunday, December 14, includes five sectors in Virginia ranging from Great Falls Park to the eastern corner of Loudoun County. To participate, contact Jim Nelson at kingfishers2@verizon.net.
- The **Manassas-Bull Run** count is on Sunday, December 14. Contact Doug Levey by December 6 at neomorphis0920@gmail.com.
- **Sweet Run State Park** in northwestern Loudoun County is part of the Charlestown WV count on Sunday, December 21. If you'd like to participate on the team that covers Sweet Run, contact Joe Coleman at jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org.
- The **Calmes Neck** count on Saturday, January 3, includes much of far western Loudoun County and eastern Clarke County. Contact Margaret Wester at margaretwester@hotmail.com no later than December 18.

You can see these count circles at https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/94b00fd33a7d4dec9df71f053fac22a3



Northern Shovelers swim and splash despite winter's chill. Photo by Bryan Henson

Volunteers install native plants and trees at Leesburg's Freedom Park; a 1998 Habitat Herald cover recalls Loudoun Wildlife's important role in preserving Banshee Reeks; volunteers place salamander boards at JK Black Oak Wildlife Sanctuary. Photos from Loudoun Wildlife archives

Continued from page 1

it is more subtle, as when we plant nonnative aggressive plants in our new yards or use pesticides to kill essential pollinating insects because we consider them a nuisance.

When those nonnative plants take over the natural areas that an enlightened developer has created (or left untouched) within a new community, they push out the native plants and the wildlife that depends on them. When we light up our houses and neighborhoods because we're afraid of the dark, we alter the natural landscape and create a world where much less wildlife can survive, let alone thrive.

This new organization, knowing that there was a lot of knowledge out there, partnered with several conservation organizations and began offering well-attended programs on a variety of conservation topics. This fledgling organization also decided that everything it did and everything it advocated for should be based on hard data and, to ensure that, the organization began a number of scientific monitoring programs that continue to this day.

Because we all need clean water to survive and recognize the importance of healthy streams and riparian habitats for wildlife, one of Loudoun Wildlife's first initiatives was to work with other organizations to create a stream-monitoring program. In partnership with the Audubon Naturalist Society (now Nature Forward), the Loudoun Soil and Water Conservation District, and the North Fork Goose Creek Watershed, we received funding from the Chesapeake Bay Restoration Fund for a stream-monitoring program and began monitoring eight of the county's 14 watersheds in 1998. We worked with the Loudoun Watershed Watch, one of our many partners, to do bacteria monitoring and plant riparian buffers in the Catoctin Watershed.

We also partnered with the Waterford Foundation to plant thousands of trees and shrubs on the Phillips Farm and remove invasive plants there. Because healthy and extensive riparian buffers not only protect a stream's health but also the wildlife that lives there, we planted several riparian buffers in that and other county watersheds. To this day, the large riparian buffer at Phillips Farm is still a place where wildlife and native plants thrive.

Today, Loudoun Wildlife has 28 benthic macroinvertebrate monitoring sites and, in partnership with the local Izaak Walton League of America, monitors the impact of road salt on our streams.

Loudoun Wildlife was still a very young organization in 1997, but it was a watershed year. We held our first butterfly and bird counts and took the lead in the campaign to make Banshee Reeks a nature preserve. This campaign really took off in 1998 as the county debated what the best use of the property was. In the press and over the phone, we succeeded in rallying Loudoun's citizens to convince the Board of Supervisors that Banshee Reeks should be kept natural. Finally, on April 21, 1999, the Board of Supervisors voted to establish the Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve.

In spite of their importance to amphibians and many other kinds of wildlife, vernal pools are a type of wetlands that are rarely protected because of their ephemeral nature (most only have water from late autumn through early spring). Recognizing their importance to wildlife, we made them a focus for Loudoun Wildlife during the winter of 1998-1999, and they are still a focus today. In 2006, Loudoun Wildlife began an Amphibian Monitoring Program that continues.

Volunteers monitor the health of a Loudoun stream; Joe Coleman has been leading birding walks almost since Loudoun Wildlife began. Photos from Loudoun Wildlife archives

At the same time, we became aware of the importance of the limestone karst geology of the area around Lucketts to salamanders, frogs, and a variety of other wildlife. We learned of the globally rare wetlands on the Lee Family Farm between Route 15 and Montressor Road and, with our partners, worked with the family to have conservation easements placed on their farm.

As a result of our amphibian monitoring, we learned of an 87-acre property with globally rare wetlands about a mile north of the Lee farm. In 2020 we took ownership of it, and today it is our very own nature preserve, the JK Black Oak Wildlife Sanctuary, also protected forever by conservation easements. We have worked extensively to protect and enhance the habitat there.

Almost from our inception, we partnered with the Piedmont Environmental Council on a nature camp for children at Banshee Reeks. We began offering more youth programs in the mid-2000s. We supported the Roger Tory Peterson Awards program in the Loudoun County Public School system and played an integral role in the creation of the Loudoun Environmental Education Council in 2007.

Birding has always played an important role in Loudoun Wildlife's activities. Not only have we held innumerable bird walks almost since we began, but our first Christmas Bird Count was held in 1997. As a result, today we have 30 years of data showing how avian populations have fared during that time period.

More significantly, from 2009 through early 2014, Spring Ligi coordinated the Birds of Loudoun Atlas Project. This study, which involved many volunteers, captured data on birds both nesting in and migrating through Loudoun County and culminated in the publication of *Birds of Loudoun*. Bird atlases on a county level are very uncommon, but capturing data for migratory birds is even less common. While healthy migratory stop-over locations are integral to the health of birds, they are often overlooked in studies of the habitat necessary for supporting healthy avian populations. As a result of our atlas, we know which areas in the county are of high value to birds and need to be preserved and protected.

Bluebird numbers are a testament to the importance of how increasing habitat can dramatically change the status of a species. In 2004, Loudoun Wildlife's then-president, Nicole Hamilton (now Sudduth), began our bluebird trail program with 13 trails. Today, a team — comprised of Rich Wailes, Sharon Crowell, Sarah Flanagan, Lisa McKew, and Amelia Waring — leads a program with 63 trails and 753 nest boxes that fledged 1,595 Eastern Bluebirds, 1,099 Tree Swallows, 495 House Wrens, and 74 Carolina Chickadees in 2024. As a result of our extensive bluebird trail projects and education, bluebirds are again thriving and doing an incredible job of natural pest control in Loudoun County.

Our participation in the Annual Butterfly Count has also shown the importance of maintaining healthy habitats. Overall, we've seen a notable decline in butterflies as the county has developed, and climate change has had a greater impact on their populations. However, our backyard habitat programs, including the Wildlife Sanctuary Program, encourage people to plant and maintain habitats where butterflies can still thrive.

Through the efforts of our members, numerous volunteers, and staff, we have grown into the largest and most comprehensive environmental organization in Loudoun County as we have, for over 30 years, protected, preserved, and restored wildlife habitat.

Smarter Salting Protects Our Streams and Wildlife

by Amy Ulland, Stream Monitoring Coordinator

Loudoun Wildlife requested that these open salt bags at a local business be cleaned up. Each bag can permanently pollute 10,000 gallons of water — the amount in a residential swimming pool! Photo by Amy Ulland

When winter storms arrive, many of us instinctively reach for the salt bag to keep our driveways and sidewalks safe. But what we put on the ground doesn't just stay there. Every crystal of salt eventually washes into nearby streams, where it permanently pollutes the water, harming fish, amphibians, insects, and other wildlife that depend on clean, fresh water.

The numbers are startling. Just 1 teaspoon of road salt is enough to permanently pollute 5 gallons of stream water. Once salt is in our waterways, there's no easy way to remove it. By being "smarter salters," we can balance winter safety with protection for our environment.

5 Simple Steps for Smarter Salting

1. **Shovel first.** Salt is designed to melt ice, not snow. Shoveling or sweeping before salting reduces how much you'll need — and sometimes eliminates the need altogether.
2. **Measure, don't dump.** A little goes a long way. Just 12 ounces (about the size of a coffee mug) is enough to treat a 20-foot driveway or 10 sidewalk squares. Using more won't speed up melting; it just increases pollution.
3. **Use it only when needed.** Before salting, ask, "Is it really necessary?" On a sunny day, cleared pavement may melt naturally without any help.
4. **Sweep up leftovers.** After the storm, check your driveway and sidewalks. If salt remains once the ice is gone, sweep it up and store it to use again. This simple step keeps salt out of storm drains and out of our streams.
5. **Report excess salt.** If you see large piles left on roads, sidewalks, or parking lots after a storm, report them to your town or county. Alerting public works crews can prevent thousands of gallons of water from being polluted.

Why It Matters

Excess salt upsets stream chemistry, threatening benthic macroinvertebrates — aquatic insects, crustaceans, snails, and other small creatures that keep streams clean and recycle nutrients. These organisms form the base of the food web, feeding fish, birds, and amphibians. Healthy fish populations in turn support other wildlife, recreational fishing, and overall ecosystem balance.

Salt Watch volunteer Will Bassett tests chloride levels at Town Branch while a Great Egret looks on. Photo by Adrienne Bassett

Because benthic macroinvertebrates are so central to stream life, they're also Loudoun Wildlife's primary way to monitor stream health: Changes in their diversity and abundance reveal when water quality is in trouble. When these species decline, the effects ripple up the chain, impacting waterfowl, mammals, and even people who rely on clean water.

Salt also seeps into groundwater, threatening drinking supplies, and damages roadside vegetation, soils, and trees. In Loudoun County, where creeks and rivers feed the Potomac and Chesapeake Bay, our choices have far-reaching downstream impacts.

Salt Watch: Community Science in Action

Now in its fifth season, Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy's Salt Watch program — run in partnership with the Izaak Walton League of America (IWLA) — has grown into one of the largest in the country. Thanks to IWLA's generous support, our volunteers receive free test kits to monitor chloride levels in streams. Chloride is the chemical in road salt that dissolves in water, and elevated levels are a clear sign of salt pollution.

Year-round, Loudoun Wildlife Salt Watchers collect samples monthly and after major winter storms, building a dataset that reveals both seasonal trends and pollution spikes. Locally, we monitor more than 80 stream sites and contribute about 15 percent of all Salt Watch data nationwide. This information is used at both the local and national levels to pinpoint pollution hotspots, raise awareness about the relationship between road salt and stream health, and inform scientists and policymakers working on solutions.

We're always looking for more monitors and stream sites, and Salt Watch is easy to jump into. No experience is needed; training and free test kits are provided. It's family-friendly, fun, and a rewarding way to connect with your local creek while giving back to the environment.

You can make a difference right at home: shovel before salting, measure carefully, skip salt when it isn't needed, sweep up leftovers, and report excess piles. Small steps like these protect wildlife and water quality while keeping your walkways safe.

Join Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy's Salt Watch team. Contact ***Amy Ulland*** *(aulland@loudounwildlife.org) for more information.*

Count Lessons: Leave an Untended Corner for Butterflies

by Anne Ellis, Butterfly Count Coordinator

This Variegated Fritillary caterpillar, nibbling on a native Passionflower's leaves, will overwinter under leaf litter. Photo by John Ellis

Loudoun Wildlife's 29th Annual Butterfly Count was held on August 2, a day as fine and perfect as any summer day: temperatures in the low 80s, reasonable humidity, and light, refreshing breezes. Butterflies like this weather. Ten teams composed of 88 novices, students, butterfly fanciers, and experts reported 2,949 butterflies in flight, including 46 species — much better than 2024. Check out our data at https://loudounwildlife.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/2025-Count-Data-Final.pdf.

Highlights of the count included a rare-for-our-count Southern Cloudywing, seven American Coppers (a record for us), and an astonishing 22 American Snouts! Interestingly, the host plants for these three species are considered roadside weeds: Cloudywing caterpillars eat tick trefoils and other legumes; Copper caterpillars enjoy sheep sorrel and curly dock; and Snout caterpillars are found on Hackberry, a common native tree. One might expect to see large numbers of these butterflies every year. Most butterfly populations are cyclical to some degree. However, roadside weeds are treated with herbicides every few years, and this was one of the problems identified as a factor in last year's count. The roadsides were not treated before the count this year.

Although butterfly numbers were up from last year, they were still below our 10-year average. Scientists have been concerned about the rapid decline in insect populations for some time and are expressing an urgent need to protect butterflies from further loss. The *Science* magazine article of March 7, 2025, "Rapid butterfly declines across the United States during the 21st century," provides more details. (You can read the article for free on the North American Butterfly Association's website at https://naba.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Rapid-butterfly-declines-across-the-United-States-during-the-21st-century_Science_03072025.pdf.)

What can we do to help our favorite pollinators? Be radical and leave old flower stalks standing and leaf litter lying! Many butterflies, such as the Variegated Fritillary, overwinter as caterpillars, often under fallen leaves where temperatures stay just above freezing, and become active again when their host plants leaf out in spring. Bumblebees, our No. 1 pollinators, also overwinter in leaf litter. Raking fall leaves and leaving them under garden shrubs can provide a haven for these insects. Whether you live on a farm or an urban lot, you can positively impact pollinators throughout the year. Providing host and nectar plants; withholding pesticides, such as Bt (Bacillus thuringiensis); and leaving a little corner of your lot untended can add up to a thriving pollinator community near you.

Join us for Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy's 30th Annual Butterfly Count on August 1, 2026.

Wild Success for JK Black Oak's 'Wild' Open House

by Tom Kercheval, Executive Director

Trinity Mills (right), Loudoun Wildlife's conservation advocacy specialist, was among those who welcomed guests to Black Oak and shared information about the sanctuary and the threat it faces from the planned Route 15 Bypass. Photo by Tom Kercheval

On Sunday, September 14, more than 300 people enjoyed a rare opportunity to experience the beauty of our JK Black Oak Wildlife Sanctuary firsthand during what was billed as the "wildest open house of the year."

Located west of Lucketts, the sanctuary is 89 glorious acres that are home to more than 1,000 species of wildlife. Through the aid of generous partners and donors, Loudoun Wildlife purchased JK Black Oak in 2020 with a singular commitment: to forever preserve and enhance its globally rare wetlands by protecting its sensitive vernal pools, unique geological setting, and rich amphibian and wildlife populations. We've been fulfilling that commitment ever since, and the open house was an inspiring opportunity to show the public what we've accomplished, what we're planning, and why it matters.

The cool yet sun-soaked open house day was perfect for self-guided tours of several of the property's trails, leading visitors to majestic forests, thriving meadows, and rare vernal pools, some of which (currently dry) were covered in a stunning abundance of gleaming Bidens. Organized bird and nature walks were also conducted; in fact, registration filled up so quickly that additional leaders were added to split up the groups and accommodate demand. An impressive 54 species were identified on the bird walks, and a species of butterfly that hadn't been seen before at JK Black Oak was also spotted: the White-M Hairstreak!

Open house guests follow guides along trails through Black Oak's forest and meadows. Photo by Tom Kercheval

"I've been here before volunteering to plant some native plants, so it was good to come back and see how things are progressing," said visitor and volunteer Sarah Turner. "The progress that has happened here is amazing, because a lot of the native plants are now thriving, the vernal pools have been protected, and there have been so many invasive plants removed, which is important."

Adding to the educational value of the Open House were the Information stations set up throughout the property, offering deeper looks into our amphibian and reptile monitoring, bat monitoring, forest restoration efforts, and more. Other signs along the trails provided information on the property's flora and fauna and the restoration projects taking place.

"JK Black Oak is very, very unique in its geology," said Jenny Erickson, Loudoun Wildlife's Amphibian and Reptile Monitoring coordinator. "It has a number of vernal pools, which are temporary pools that a lot of our amphibians, reptiles, birds, and other wildlife rely on for life. These areas are disappearing very quickly, and they need to be preserved."

Our advocacy table was a buzzing hive all day, with Loudoun Wildlife staff answering questions about the proposed Route 15 bypass and how the routes currently being considered would adversely affect the sanctuary. Our friends from the Lucketts Ruritan Club added to the conversation with their own table.

"A lot of the wildlife coming through here need this place, and so do the species that live here year-round," said Loudoun Wildlife Board member and volunteer John Denice. "The Route 15 bypass is going to cut this off from the other wild places, and that's one of the reasons we're against it; we're advocating for the wildlife."

As the final emphatic "thank-you" was offered from the last departing visitor, the overall success of the day was as clear as the late afternoon sky. "It was a *huge* success," said Allison Gallo, a Loudoun Wildlife volunteer and member of our JK Black Oak Committee. "From the minute the gates opened, we had a steady stream of visitors the entire day. It was great to see so many people exploring the trails and showing interest in all the conservation, restoration, and community science work being done on the property."

For more on JK Black Oak, visit https://loudounwildlife.org/black-oak/.

For more on the Route 15 bypass and how to get involved, visit https://loudounwildlife.org/2025/06/route-15-lucketts-bypass/

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 President Amy Ulland at *aulland@loudounwildlife.org* for additional information.

Writing in Nature — First Thursdays (except second in January): November 6, December 4, January 8, 11:00 am – 12:30 pm, Gatehouse at Morven Park. Join Nancy Morgan, director emeritus, Georgetown Lombardi Arts and Humanities Program, for this 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.*

Birding Bles — Saturday, November 1, 8:00 am, Bles Park. Join Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy on a search for birds at the newly reopened Bles Park in eastern Loudoun. Bles is a birding hotspot with a mix of water habitats that appeal to a diverse mix of species. Bring binoculars if you have them. We'll meet at the parking lot near the playground. ***Registration required:*** *Sign Up Online.* ***Questions:*** *Contact Bryan Henson at bhenson@loudounwildlife.org.*

JK Black Oak Workday — Saturday, November 1, 9:00 am – 12:00 pm, JK Black Oak Wildlife Sanctuary. Join Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy for habitat restoration projects that include invasive plant removal, protecting trees, and planting. Please be aware that you may encounter poison ivy and ticks at the work site. Long sleeves and pants, gloves, and insect repellant are recommended. *Limit 20 (minimum age 16).* ***Registration required:*** *Sign Up Online.* ***Questions:*** *Contact Sheila Ferguson at sferguson@loudounwildlife.org.* ***Note:*** *Due to the environmentally sensitive habitat and rare species, JK Black Oak is not open for general public access.*

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 and the Friends of Banshee Reeks for the monthly bird walk at this birding hotspot. Bring binoculars if you have them. *Registration required: Sign Up Online. Questions: Contact Joe Coleman at jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org.*

Second Saturdays: November 8, December 13, January 10, 8:00 am

Birding Algonkian

Join Loudoun Wildlife on a search for birds at Loudoun's top birding hotspot, Algonkian Regional Park in eastern Loudoun, for the monthly bird walk. Combining extensive frontage along the Potomac River, rich bottomland forests, wetlands, and extensive grassy areas, this can be a very productive place to bird. *Registration required: Sign Up Online. Questions: Contact Bryan Henson at bhenson@loudounwildlife.org.*

Third Sundays (except December): November 16, January 18, 8:00 am

Birding Sweet Run

Sweet Run State Park has 894 acres of diverse habitat consisting of rich oak-hickory forest, meadows, ponds, streams, and vernal pools in northwestern Loudoun. It borders the Appalachian Trail and is only a couple of miles from the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers. Sweet Run is a wonderful sanctuary for wildlife, with numerous bird species utilizing its richness. These walks are sponsored by Loudoun Wildlife; bring binoculars if you have them. Sweet Run is located just north of Neersville at 11661 Harpers Ferry Road (Rte. 671); detailed directions at https://www.dcr.virginia.gov/state-parks/sweet-run. *Registration required: Sign Up Online. Questions: Contact Joe Coleman at jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org. Fee Notice: Sweet Run is now collecting parking fees via self-pay kiosks located at each parking area/entrance. The fee for a standard vehicle is $10. View fee information at https://www.dcr.virginia.gov/state-parks/parking-fees.*

Fourth Saturdays (except December): November 22, January 24, 8:00 am

Walk for Wildlife Closing Celebration — Sunday, November 2, 2:00 – 4:00 pm. Join us for a nature-enthusiast gathering at Lost Rhino Brewing Company in Ashburn to celebrate Walk for Wildlife. We'll hand out awards and share some highlights from the event along with celebrating the community science efforts and the positive impact they have on our community. Please note that this event is limited to Walk for Wildlife participants. ***Questions:*** *Contact walkforwildlife@loudounwildlife.org.*

Action Photography — Wednesday, November 5, 7:00 – 8:00 pm, Gum Springs Library. Join professional photographer Jeff Mauritzen to learn how to tackle one of the most challenging aspects of photography! Whether capturing sports, wildlife, pets, or life's various special moments, documenting a quickly unfolding moment in sharp detail can be frustrating. For the last 12 years, Jeff has been guiding and lecturing as a photography expert for National Geographic Expeditions. This program is co-sponsored by the Loudoun County Public Library and Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy. **Registration requested.**

Young Birders Walk at Algonkian — Sunday, November 16, 8:00 am. Join Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy's Young Birding Program for a bird walk for young birders at AlgonkianRegional Park. Algonkian is the county's top birding hotspot, with over 230 species of birds observed here. We'll look for year-round residents and early winter arrivals. Meet at the boat ramp; bring binoculars if you have them (we'll have some to share). This walk is exclusively for young birders ages 10–18; a parent/guardian is welcome. ***Registration required:*** *Sign Up Online.* ***Questions:*** *Contact Patrick Lewis at plewis@loudounwildlife.org.*

Read! Plant! Grow! Book Club — Sunday, November 23, 5:30 pm, Birch Tree Bookstore, Leesburg. Join our partners Watermark Woods Native Plants, Loudoun County Public Library (LCPL), and Birch Tree Bookstore for the Read! Plant! Grow! Book Club, which focuses on native plants, sponsored by Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy and LCPL. At this meeting we'll discuss the book *Abundance* by Derek Thompson and Ezra Klein. *Abundance* posits that our problems today are not the results of yesteryear's villains. Rather, one generation's solutions have become the next generation's problems. Rules and regulations designed to solve the problems of the 1970s often prevent urban-density and green-energy projects that would help solve the problems of the 2020s. To obtain a copy of the book, contact Allison Forbes at Allison.Forbes@loudoun.gov and she will send one to your nearest library for pickup. Attendees can also choose to purchase the book at Birch Tree. Attend in person or online by going to the LCPL website (https://library.loudoun.gov/) and clicking Event Calendar to get the link.

Nearly 30 volunteers joined Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy's Salt Watch Kickoff Workshop in October, forming a dozen new teams ready to track road salt pollution in our local streams. Photo by Amy Ulland

Giving Tuesday — Tuesday, December 2. Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy is a membership-based, volunteer-driven, nonprofit organization committed to one mission: to protect, preserve, and restore wildlife habitat. #GivingTuesday offers a unique opportunity to make a dramatic difference in accomplishing that mission. We've accomplished some incredible feats in 2025 thanks to the hard work, dedication, and determination of our members and volunteers. Your donation on #GivingTuesday helps ensure we'll continue to make a difference in 2026 and beyond, so please spread the word! Early giving will start in November.

Birding Dulles Greenway Wetlands — Saturday, December 6, 8:00 am. Join Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy for a bird walk at the privately owned Dulles Greenway Wetlands. Created 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 magnificent Bald Eagles. ***Expect to encounter rough terrain where walking is difficult as well as briars and wet/muddy spots.*** *Parking information will be sent to participants prior to the walk. Limit 10.* ***Registration required:*** *Sign Up Online.* ***Questions:*** *Contact Joe Coleman at jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org.*

Winter Sowing — Sunday, December 7, 2:00 – 4:00 pm, Gatehouse at Morven Park. Join Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy and Wildlife Sanctuary Ambassador and Virginia Master Naturalist Brian Magurn at the Gatehouse for hands-on training for winter-sowing native plant seeds in containers. We will plant native plant seeds in recycled plastic containers that you bring. We'll provide the soil and will also have some seeds to share. It's fun to create your own science experiment each year, patiently wait through the winter, then watch them grow outside in the spring. Thanks to Watermark Woods Native Plants for donating potting soil. *Family-friendly; limit 15.* ***Registration required:*** *Sign Up Online.*

A Croak in the Night: Introduction to the Frogs and Toads of Loudoun — Thursday, December 11, 7:00 – 8:30 pm, Rust Library. If you've ever sat outside listening to the sounds of nature and wondered what species of frog or toad you are hearing, then this program is for you! Join Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy for an introduction to our local frog and toad species. Learn how to identify

them both visually and by their calls, and learn what you can do to help protect the habitats of this fragile group of amphibians. This presentation is co-sponsored by the Loudoun County Public Library and Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy. **Registration requested.**

Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy Open House — Saturday, December 13, 12:00 – 3:00 pm, Gatehouse at Morven Park. Join us for an open house at Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy's office at the Morven Park Gatehouse. This is a great opportunity to learn more about who we are, what we do, and how we're making a positive impact with the help of our passionate members, supporters, and volunteers. Learn about our inspiring programs, enjoy seasonal refreshments, grab some Loudoun Wildlife merch for the holidays, meet our staff, and discover how we're working to protect, preserve, and restore wildlife habitat while shaping a Loudoun where people and wildlife thrive together. We hope to see you there for an afternoon of conversation, learning, and community! Directions: https://loudounwildlife.org/2019/01/directions-to-the-gatehouse/

Central Loudoun Christmas Bird Count — Monday, December 29. 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 countryside: north to Waterford, south to Aldie, east to Ashburn, and west to Purcellville. Everyone is welcome; amateurs are teamed with experienced birders. For more information, check out the article on the count in this issue. Whether you are interested in participating for just a couple hours or the entire day, sign up at *https://loudounwildlife.org/citizen-science/bird-counts/christmas-bird-count/*. ***Questions:*** *Contact Joe Coleman (jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org) or Bryan Henson (bhenson@loudounwildlife.org).*

Birding Dulles Greenway Wetlands — Sunday, January 11, 8:00 am. See December 6.

Winter Walk — Sunday, January 11, 10:00 am, Balls Bluff Regional Park. Join naturalist Jake van Schilfgaarde on this Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy winter walk to discover and discuss animals' and plants' survival strategies in Virginia winters. We will look for signs we find along the trails, which have moderate, rocky slopes and could be muddy or icy. We will enjoy a beautiful time appreciating this natural setting along the Potomac River; participants should have sturdy footwear and dress for the weather. *Family-friendly; limit* 12. ***Registration required:*** *Sign Up Online.*

Birding Broad Run Stream Valley Park — Saturday, January 17, 8:00 am. Join Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy as we search for birds at this surprisingly rich park along Broad Run in Brambleton. The park combines several different habitats, including a rich floodplain, stream, edge, meadow, and multiple ponds, all of which attract a good variety of birds. Parking instructions will be emailed to registered participants. *Limit 15.* ***Registration required:*** *Sign Up Online.*

Amphibian and Reptile 2026 Monitoring Season Kickoff — Thursday, January 22, 7:00 – 8:30 pm, Rust Library. Our local amphibians and reptiles are susceptible to habitat destruction and pollutants and often are victims of being misunderstood. Join Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy for an introductory look at local amphibians and reptiles, what our citizens can do to help protect their habitats, and what related programs are available through Loudoun Wildlife to help monitor populations and increase community awareness of these often overlooked and fragile species. This presentation is co-sponsored by the Loudoun County Public Library and Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy. **Registration requested.**

Birding Gilbert's Corner — Sunday, January 25, 9:00 am. Join Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy for a bird walk at the relatively new Gilbert's Corner Regional Park in Aldie. With a combination of scrub, brush, and meadow, this park is a great birding spot in southwestern Loudoun. *Limit 14.* ***Registration required:*** *Sign Up Online.* ***Questions:*** *Contact Joe Coleman at jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org.*

Young Birders Walk at Gilbert's Corner — Sunday, January 25, 9:00 am. Join Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy's Young Birding Program for a bird walk for young birders at Gilbert's Corner Regional Park in Aldie. *This walk is exclusively for young birders ages 10–18; a parent/guardian is welcome.* ***Registration required:*** *Sign Up Online.* ***Questions:*** *Contact Patrick Lewis at plewis@loudounwildlife.org.*

Searching for Birds of Prey: Field Trip — Saturday, January 31, 1:30 pm – dusk. Join Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy on a winter raptor search. We will drive the back roads of Loudoun, with frequent stops to find and identify the many hawks, and maybe an owl or two, that overwinter here. Attendance on the field trip is limited. ***Registration required:*** *Sign Up Online.*

Waterfowl of Loudoun: Field Trip — Saturday, February 14, 9:00 am – 1:00 pm. Because winter generally brings a variety of attractive waterfowl to our area, Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy is offering a field trip so you can get to know these beautiful birds. The field trip will visit several local hotspots where we should be able to find many of the species that regularly visit the county. *Limit 12.* ***Registration required:*** *Sign Up Online.*

"The song you heard singing
in the leaf when you
were a child
is singing still."

– Mary Oliver

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Help us gain 300 new or renewed members by December 31, 2025, to honor 30 years of accomplishing our vital mission:

to PROTECT, PRESERVE, and RESTORE wildlife habitat.

Members receive a variety of benefits, including early access to programs and events, discounts at local businesses, Northwest Federal Credit Union eligibility, and more.

Join today at https://loudounwildlife.org/join-renew/.