

Habitat Herald

A Publication of the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy

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BLACK-NECKED STILTS and SWALLOW-TAILED KITES:

A Birdathon for the Books



by Joe Coleman,
Birding Activities Co-coordinator

This year's Birdathon is one that we will all remember:

- Two Black-necked Stilts, never before recorded in Loudoun County, were found by the Shrike Force team as they began their Birdathon. Another rarity, a Swallow-tailed Kite, was found by the Snap! Grackle! Pop! team at Algonkian Regional Park.
- 54 teams, 38 of them from Woodgrove High School, signed up to participate in the Birdathon.
- The 16 non-Woodgrove High School Birdathon teams raised almost \$26,000, just shy of last year's record amount.
- 162 bird species were found between April 18 and May 17 by the Birdathon teams and participants in the 14 Celebrate Birds walks and the Big Sit.

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Meadowbrook Farm Ponds in Leesburg held an unexpected treat for some Birdathon teams: Two fishing Black-necked Stilts, a species not previously recorded in Loudoun County. Photo by Bryan Henson

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Executive Director's Message

Hello, Loudoun Wildlife family!



When you're helping plan big events, it's easy to get lost in logistics. How should we get the word out? Do we have enough volunteers? Will the A/V equipment work? Is there enough seating? Is the agenda timed correctly?

Answering those questions — and many more — is obviously a crucial part of planning. But two events we recently held offered an important reminder: The most important question of all is, "Will people leave this event inspired?" Both our Peterson Young Naturalist Program Awards Celebration and our 2026 Annual Meeting answered that question with a resounding "yes!"

At our Peterson Celebration, we honored students and teachers for excellence in nature journaling through our growing Peterson Young Naturalist Program, which trains Loudoun County educators to deliver outdoor learning to their students. This was our first stand-alone Peterson Celebration, so we weren't sure what to expect. What we found was a jam-packed gymnasium filled with families, educators, and community members celebrating and encouraging our future naturalists. Seeing the pride on the faces of our K-12 student winners was genuinely goosebump-inducing for planners and participants alike.

The following weekend brought Loudoun Wildlife's Annual Meeting. I joked that I say "biggest ever" a lot (perhaps too much) when describing our events. But what can I say? This truly was our biggest Annual Meeting ever. The rousing response to our award winners being recognized for their volunteerism, advocacy, and mission-based efforts created some especially powerful moments. Seeing representatives from nearly all of our peerless programs under one roof inspired deep pride and gratitude, and watching our young Regional Science & Engineering Fair winners proudly and eloquently describe their projects to interested guests provided a hopeful glimpse of the future we're working to build.

Both events were powerful reminders of why we do what we do and the unwavering dedication of those who help us do it, but being reminded of those things shouldn't take a big event. Inspiring moments like the ones we celebrated are happening all around us every day: a first-time Birdathon participant discovering the wonder of birds, a volunteer helping to restore a local meadow, a neighbor planting a native garden in their backyard, a child realizing that the best parts of our world do not exist on a screen. As we head into the heart of summer, let's recommit ourselves to noticing and celebrating those moments wherever we find them, because our biggest victories are built on those small acts of care, commitment, and connection.



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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.

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Conservation Advocacy:

Public in the Dark About Current Bypass Plans

by Trinity Mills, Conservation Advocacy Specialist

Loudoun County has remained tight-lipped about the latest developments regarding the Lucketts Bypass. As was revealed through a community Freedom of Information Act request this spring, the county government submitted two competing applications for SmartScale (a state funding mechanism). One is for a version of the full bypass (likely following the currently publicized route along New Valley Church Road), and the second is for a smaller “mini” bypass that would include a roundabout and lower speeds.

The county has still made no official updates to the public on the status of this project in 2026. The Board of Supervisors endorsed the submission of the grant applications in June, but no specifics on their content have been released. Notably absent from public view are maps of the proposed locations, so while we do not know the extent to which these applications would impact JK Black Oak Wildlife Sanctuary, we can assume that the damage to the preserve would be significant.



Paris Mountain Resort

Developers of the proposed Eastwinds Resort on Paris Mountain are expected to

submit their application soon for a new hotel complex looking to span 146 acres of steep slopes across three counties, with the building area located entirely in the farthest southwest corner of Loudoun County.

We’re continuing to work with a coalition of other organizations through the Paris Mountain Alliance (<https://www.friendsofblueridge.org/protect-paris-mountain/>) to oppose this project. We have deployed ultrasonic monitors for

the summer to investigate the potential presence of threatened or endangered bat populations to help demonstrate the property’s importance to local wildlife.



Data Center Uses and Standards CPAM/ZOAM

Phase 2 of the Data Center Comprehensive Plan and

Zoning Ordinance Amendments (CPAM/ZOAM) will lay out more stringent standards for how new data centers in Loudoun County can operate. Recommendations from the county’s Transportation and Land Use Committee include stricter, data-center-specific noise standards and emissions regulations to account for diesel generators.

The county’s Department of Planning and Zoning staff is proposing these considerations as well as restrictions for data centers in the Transition Policy Area, enablement of onsite power generation, and regulations or standards for required substations. Draft text prepared by county staff is currently under review by the Zoning Ordinance Committee (with a potential avenue for stakeholder involvement) and will be up for public input this summer.



Western Loudoun Rural Uses and Standards

The county’s Board of Supervisors endorsed the

initiation of text drafting for the Western Loudoun Rural Uses and Standards CPAM/ZOAM. This process saw several reconsiderations by the Board around contentious issues — namely event space regulations for wineries and

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Learn more about how you can advocate for Loudoun’s wildlife and wild spaces:

<https://loudounwildlife.org/conservation-advocacy/>

breweries. Loudoun Wildlife gave our input on how the resulting text will impact habitat, primarily relating to the need to protect the Mountainside Overlay District (MOD) within the county. One of the most notable items regarding habitat to come out of the reconsiderations was a motion to explore the possibility of requiring a minor “special exception” for assembly use structures on sensitive and somewhat sensitive areas of the MOD, and the investigation of increasing setback requirements from mountain spring features.



Some Loudoun Wins in New State Budget

Coming down to the wire of the end-of-June

deadline, Virginia now has a state budget. Budget negotiations stalled after the House and Senate reached an impasse on a key issue: elimination of the Commonwealth’s data center tax exemption. Despite a valiant effort by several in the Virginia Senate, the tax credit remains in effect.

However, the budget includes some major wins for our county as well:

- After years of campaigning, Oak Hill, once the estate of founding father and U.S. President James Monroe, has been approved to become a new state park.
- The Virginia budget includes funds for a study of the threats and challenges to the groundwater supply in western Loudoun and Fauquier counties.



Know Before You Go: Our New *E. coli* Monitoring Program

by Amy Ulland, Stream Monitoring Coordinator

A stream can look clean and healthy and still make you sick. Many people don't realize that urban and suburban streams can carry bacterial contamination year-round — and that activities as casual as letting a dog wade or a child splash at the water's edge can carry real risk. This summer, Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy's Stream Monitoring Program is working to change that.

Loudoun Wildlife launched a new weekly *E. coli* monitoring program at four publicly accessible stream sites in the Leesburg area, giving residents weekly water quality information and raising awareness about bacterial contamination in local waterways. Samples are tested using R-Cards, which reveal *E. coli* colonies as visible dots after 24 hours of incubation. Results are posted every Friday morning on an interactive web map so people can check conditions before heading out for the weekend.



The view looking upstream on Goose Creek from the Keep Loudoun Beautiful Park's kayak launching site, one of the four *E. coli* testing sites in the summer monitoring program. Photo by Amy Ulland



Why *E. coli*?

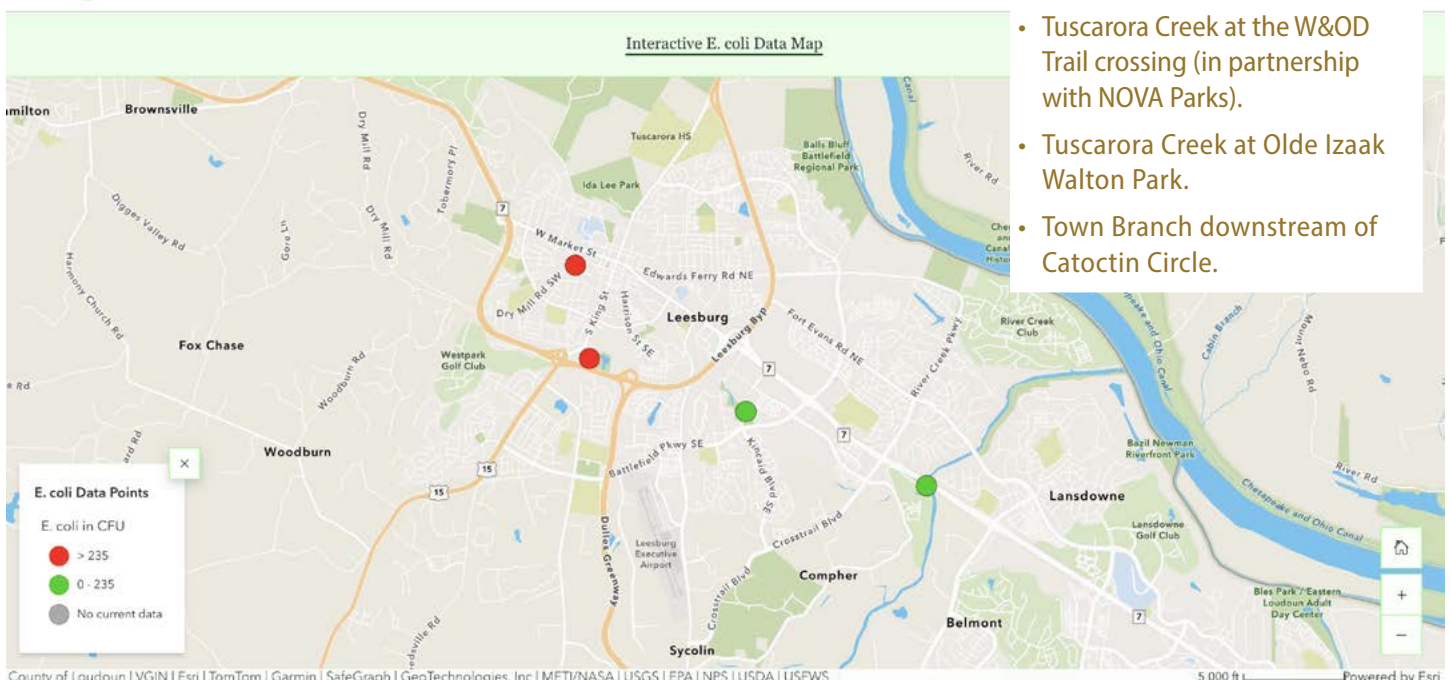
E. coli is a bacterium shed in the feces of warm-blooded animals and is used as an indicator of fecal contamination in streams. Its presence signals that other harmful pathogens may also be in the water, posing real health risks to anyone who comes into contact with it. Symptoms of exposure can include gastrointestinal illness and pink eye. Young children, elderly adults, and smaller pets are especially vulnerable.

Loudoun Wildlife monitors four sites along Goose Creek and its tributaries in or near Leesburg:

- Goose Creek at Keep Loudoun Beautiful Park (in partnership with Loudoun County Parks and Recreation).
- Tuscarora Creek at the W&OD Trail crossing (in partnership with NOVA Parks).
- Tuscarora Creek at Olde Izaak Walton Park.
- Town Branch downstream of Catoctin Circle.



Know Before You Go: Leesburg Area Stream *E. coli* Monitoring





What the Data Shows



Six weeks after monitoring began on Memorial Day, some clear patterns had emerged.

Goose Creek has been the most consistently clean site, remaining below the recreational safety threshold of 235 colony-forming units (CFUs) per 100 mL in five of six weeks. Town Branch has shown the widest swings, reaching a season high of 3,900 CFUs on June 10 following a morning rain event, with geese and ducks observed on site that day.

Rainfall is the clearest driver of elevated levels across all four sites. On dry weeks, most sites come in below or near the threshold. Following rain events, levels spike sharply across the board. It's a good reason to check results before heading out, especially after a wet stretch.

The Team Behind the Program



The program is funded through the RiverTrends program of the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay, which supports community-based water quality monitoring across the bay's watershed, including Loudoun Wildlife's chemical monitoring program.

Amy Ulland, Loudoun Wildlife's Stream Monitoring Program coordinator, conducts the majority of weekly sampling and oversees the program. She is no stranger to *E. coli* monitoring in Loudoun County — she led Loudoun Wildlife's Lucketts Clean Water Project, a community science initiative that documented bacterial contamination threatening the drinking water of rural residents, ultimately prompting U.S. Environmental Protection Agency action against a local wastewater treatment facility. The current program extends that work into a public outreach context. (Read more in the Winter 2023 issue of the *Habitat Herald* — <https://>



These geese are a small portion of the more than 50 geese and goslings that have been seen at the Town Branch location — and likely a big reason for the high *E. coli* levels recorded there. Photo by Amy Ulland

loudounwildlife.org/2023/02/citizen-science-in-action-grant/.)

Karen Jimenez and Aila McGregor, recipients of Loudoun Wildlife's 2024 and 2025 Youth Conservation Awards respectively, are also playing key roles in the *E. coli* monitoring effort. Karen built the public-facing interactive web map and updates it each week with new results. Aila is providing sampling and testing assistance this season. Both are certified benthic macroinvertebrate monitors and active participants in our Salt Watch and chemical monitoring programs, and both bring the same dedication to this program that they bring to everything else they do with Loudoun Wildlife.



Stay Informed All Summer

Results will be posted every Friday morning through Labor Day weekend. Scan the QR code on page 4 to access our interactive web map. Follow Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy on Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn for weekly results, and share with anyone you know who frequents these locations.

The *E. coli* data is also submitted to the Chesapeake Monitoring Cooperative's Data Explorer, used by the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality and researchers across the watershed to track water quality trends over time.

Know Before You Go: Quick Tips

- Check results every Friday morning before heading to a monitored stream.
- Avoid water contact at red sites, especially for children and pets.
- Do not let pets drink from streams.
- Wash hands after any contact with stream water.
- Help reduce *E. coli* levels in streams: Pick up after your dog and dispose of waste properly, especially before rain.



Birding the Less-Traveled Trails of Sweet Run State Park

by Scott Harris

Another in our occasional “Birding Off the Beaten Path” series. If you have a favorite place off the beaten path that you’d like to tell us about, please contact Michele Savage (msavage@loudounwildlife.org) to discuss submitting an article.

I had just huffed myself up a small hill when a welcoming bench appeared along the path. I knew that when the park changed over to state control, a smattering of newly constructed benches had popped up. I settled myself onto the bench to catch my breath and catch up with some birds on my eBird list. The weather was spectacular: 70 degrees, sunny, cool, no humidity. In other words, it was perfect!



Birders who hike the remote Legacy Loop to Sweet Run State Park’s Gordon Pond often have the trail — and the birds along it — all to themselves. Photo by Scott Harris

I was only a few meters from my destination that day: Gordon Pond at Sweet Run State Park. Gordon Pond lies on the remote Legacy Loop in the furthest part of the park. It’s tantalizingly close to the heavily trafficked Farmstead Loop, but separated by a steep mountainside that prevents people from making a beeline to the pond. Instead, hikers must meander halfway down the Farmstead Loop, then to the end of Arnold Lane before beginning the Legacy Loop trail. It’s quite a hike, but the reward is solitude. Almost nobody travels this trail, and like on most mornings, I had the whole trail to myself.

As I emerged from the woods to face Gordon Pond, I had a great view of

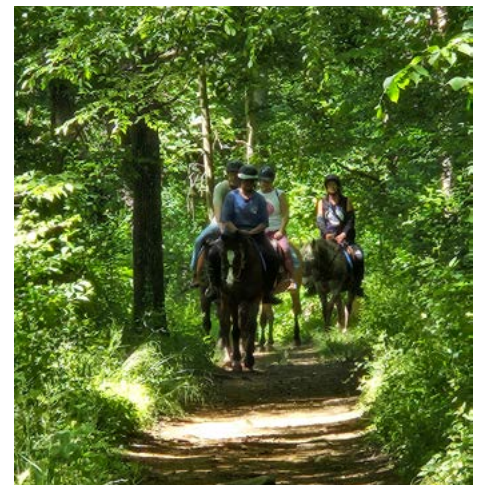
gorgeous still pond water dappled with pond lilies. Occasionally, a fish jumped in the water, while bullfrogs croaked and Scarlet Tanagers and Wood Thrushes sang in the surrounding forest.

Sweet Run is a gem in Loudoun County. One of our newest state parks (it became one in 2023), it contains 884 acres and boasts over 10 miles of very walkable trails. There are a variety of habitats that make it perfect for bird and butterfly enthusiasts, including open pasture, scrubby open land, deep deciduous forest, flowing creeks, and two small ponds.

The history of the park, most of which I’ve learned from Joe Coleman, a longtime steward of the park, is roughly paraphrased as follows: Sometime around the 1930s-1950s, the land contained a small settlement of farms. You can still see the ruins of these old stone farmhouses along the Farmstead Loop, and if you hike the park in early spring, you’ll see daffodils blooming around these structures — a clear sign that humans inhabited this land, as you will never see wild daffodils in nature around here. It is a solemn reminder that long ago, someone planted those bulbs to brighten their homestead, and they still grace us today.

In the 1990s or thereabouts, the land was slated to become a huge residential subdivision. Hundreds of acres of trees were to be leveled, and the landscape would have been forever ruined. The developer had erected a dam, and a large lake was on the property. Before substantial development could begin, Hurricane Bonnie came inland on August 27, 1998, broke the dam, and drained the lake. The developer gave up the project.

In 1999, the Robert and Dee Leggett Foundation purchased the historic Mountain View Farm (as it was then known) and established the Blue Ridge Center for Environmental Stewardship. BRCEs maintained the property as a mostly public park where people could come and hike, bird, walk their leashed dogs, and ride horses. (Local equestrian clubs have always shared responsibility for maintaining the trails in exchange for the privilege of riding in the park.) When my kids were little, we’d bring them to BRCEs to hike and wear off some of their energy. BRCEs operated as a nonprofit for almost 25 years, until the park was finally turned over to the Commonwealth of Virginia as a state park.



Horses and riders share the park’s trails with birders and hikers. Photo by Scott Harris

Many avid users of the park worried what state control would mean for the park: Would they allow motorbike or mountain-bike traffic? Would they level areas of trees to put in camper parks or new buildings? I was always of the opinion that a “light touch” was preferred in this otherwise perfect place. Thankfully, that wish came true. The state did not change the overall

nature of the park. They employ around five or six rangers, all of whom are super friendly and helpful. They have regularly occurring events like birding seminars and walks (some staffed by volunteer leaders from Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy), volunteer cleanup days, gardening and foraging programs, and much more. The infrastructure of the park was improved slightly by the addition of those benches, and all the trail markers and signs have been improved, making the park very easy to navigate.

Like most avid birders, I have several ongoing goals that I aspire to fulfill: Bird in all 50 states (I'm only missing Alaska), bird in every county in Virginia (I'm about two-thirds complete), and this month, I finished my local goal of birding the entirety of Sweet Run State Park in May: every trail at least once during May, the most rewarding month of the year due to the migration of species. At the beginning of May, you can still find winter species like Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Dark-eyed Juncos, and White-throated Sparrows. In mid-May you may find exotic warbler species like Blackburnian, Bay-breasted, and Cerulean Warblers. And by the end of May, all the summertime regulars are in place: Eastern Kingbirds, Acadian Flycatchers, Eastern Wood-Pewees, and Scarlet Tanagers.

As May drew to a close, I reflected back on my time spent in Sweet Run State Park. I remember taking a group of young Explorer Scout girls birding, and all of us discovering a Barred Owl nest with the mom on it! Mrs. Owl was peeking out from a crevice in the tree that looked way too small for her, but there she was, nonetheless. I remember visiting the park three weekends in a row in search of the elusive Blue-winged Warbler, only to be rewarded on the final visit (third time's a charm!) with the bird buzz-buzzing along the powerline cut that runs up Butterfly Alley. I remember hearing countless Scarlet Tanagers but

never seeing a single one of them in the dense canopy. *How can a bright red bird be so difficult to see?!* It is frustrating, but I've resigned myself to just hearing the birds when I can, grateful that I still have good enough hearing to hear those Blue-Gray Gnatcatchers and Cedar Waxwings that inhabit the park in great numbers.

For those of you interested in the statistics, my eBird Trip Report for Sweet Run State Park in May 2026 has the following highlights: 89 species observed, over 10 miles traversed (again, the whole park over several weekend visits during the month), and quite a few photos and sound recordings. Notable species include one Black-billed Cuckoo; one Wild Turkey gobbling in the woods near the powerline cut; a Broad-winged Hawk flyover; several Red-headed Woodpeckers (always a treat to see); an American Kestrel; Wood Thrushes as thick as American Robins in your neighborhood; at least a dozen varieties of warblers, including the Kentucky Warbler, who breeds in the park; and a singing Rose-breasted Grosbeak. (My eBird Trip report is at <https://ebird.org/tripreport/523588>.)

If you've never been to Sweet Run State Park, you don't know what you're missing! If you have already visited the park many times, I'd encourage you to try one of the lesser used trails, like the Legacy Loop or Woodthrush Trail. In these times of digital life, when we seem glued to our phones and social media, solitude is a gift that we can give ourselves. Walking through the park recharges the soul and returns us to our true selves — analog beings in an analog world. Whether you are a dog walker, an amateur naturalist, a birder, or a horseback enthusiast, this park has something to offer for everyone. Enjoy!

Scott Harris is a member of the Whisky Drinking Warbler Watchers Birdathon team and has served on Loudoun Wildlife's Board of Directors.

Historic Annual Meeting Meets the Moment

by Tom Kercheval, Executive Director



Dr. Mamie Parker delivers an inspiring keynote including stories from her life and long career in environmentalism at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Photo by Sheri Knauer

Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy marked two historic milestones at our recent 2026 Annual Meeting on June 7: the first Annual Meeting at our new home in Waterford and our largest Annual Meeting ever, welcoming more than 155 guests.

Sponsored by Wegmans of Leesburg, the event celebrated a year of remarkable growth and impact for Loudoun Wildlife. The inspiring agenda honored our volunteers and programs, spotlighted our partners, encouraged our young naturalists, distributed some well-deserved awards, and provided energizing opportunities to rally around a mission that's never been more vital: to protect, preserve, and restore wildlife habitat.

Board President and Stream Monitoring Coordinator Amy Ulland and I emceed the two distinct sessions of the program, each preceded by a social half-hour. During the social time, attendees visited tables representing a wide variety of Loudoun Wildlife programs and this year's Regional Science and Engineering Fair winners while perusing Loudoun Wildlife merchandise, enjoying light refreshments, and marveling at the beautiful papier-mâché critters Loudoun Valley High School students made just for the occasion.

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A Common Nighthawk in flight was a not-so-common sight for those attending the Big Sit. Photo by Bryan Henson



Many who gathered May 9 at Algonkian Regional Park for the spring Big Sit preferred to stand as they scanned their surroundings for birds. (Don't miss our fall Big Sit at Algonkian on October 10!) Photo by Patrick Lewis



A Baltimore Oriole photographed in mid-song at Algonkian Regional Park. Photo by Bryan Henson

Birdathon continued from page 1



The Birdathon is also a friendly competition to see who can find the most species in several categories and who can raise the most money. This year's winning teams were:

Most Species Observed by First-Timers:

The two members of **Warble On**, Leena McCluney and Adrin Andalib, found 112 species of birds over a 48-hour period.

Most Species Observed by a Family:

The Flying Kites, comprised of Eric, Kiersten, Abby, Rua, Sadie, and Henry Anderson, identified 100 species while juggling a number of family events.

Most Species Found in 24 Hours:

Gone Pishing, comprised of Allison Gallo, Bryan Henson, and Jane Yocom, beat their previous high this year by identifying 113 species in 24 hours.

Most Species Found in 48 Hours:

The **Raven Loonatics**, comprised of Bruce Hill, Larry Meade, Donna Quinn, and Gerco Hoogeweg, have always been top competitors in the unique species count, and this year found 125 species in 48 hours of birding.

Most Money Raised:

Shrike Force, comprised of Joe Coleman, Mary Ann Good, and Pat Whittle, raised over \$6,000, nearly a fourth of all money raised by the Birdathon, and found 111 species while doing so.



A Great Crested Flycatcher swoops after flying insects among the trees near Castleton Pond. Photo by Michael Sciortino



All of the birding teams commented on how much fun the Birdathon was and how special it was to enjoy Loudoun County's natural history. But many of them also noted that some once-common species here have decreased as the county's natural areas have diminished. Nonetheless, all of them

were delighted to see so much of what is still a beautiful and rich county in spite of the extensive development that has occurred in Loudoun. At the same time, that development brought home to all of us just how important the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy's mission — to protect, preserve, and restore wildlife habitat — is!

To see some of the team reports and find out more about what they saw,

visit the Birdathon section of the Loudoun Wildlife website, <https://loudounwildlife.org/2026/04/2026-birdathon-team-summaries/>. It includes photos and some of the individual checklists.



This composite photo shows two images the photographer managed to snap as a single Swallow-tailed Kite flew over Algonkian Regional Park. Photo by Karen Jimenez



A rare Rusty Blackbird found at Algonkian Regional Park. Photo by Leena McCluney



A family of Common Mergansers spotted swimming on Sugarland Run along the Algonkian Sanctuary Trail. Photo by Eric Anderson



Celebrating Peterson in the Classroom

by Tracey Baroody, Director of Education



Photo by Michael Sciortino

When people think about nature journaling in the context of school curriculum, they might view it as an enrichment activity that is just a break from “real” classroom instruction. Or an outdoor activity that helps students slow down, notice the world, and develop a deeper appreciation for nature. While all those things are true, nature journaling is more than an enrichment activity. So just how does the Peterson Young Naturalist Program (PYNP) support formal education?

2026 Young Naturalist Awards

The students (by grade) recognized for their outstanding nature journals are listed below, followed by their teachers and schools:

Emma Edwards (12), Lori Stone, Academies of Loudoun/AET
Bailey Osborne (12), Elena Meisner, Independence HS
Arshiya Sharma (12), Haley Gargan, Academies of Loudoun/AOS
Khaila Cole (12), Laura Currier, Lightridge HS
Almy Leiva Campos (12), Javel Gutierrez, Park View HS
Madeline Reaves (12), Tanya Mulvey, Tuscarora HS
Faith Pry (12), Amber Bartling, Woodgrove HS
Leah Rogers (7), Lynne Gianelos, Harmony MS
Christiana Yee (6), Manju Gomathinayagam, Farmwell Station MS
Elise Whitlock (6), Paige Rickey, Seneca Ridge MS
Vishnu Potturu (5), Yeahee Lee, Cardinal Ridge ES
Reese Hancher (4), Marlena Beach, Banneker ES
Mahita Nalla (4), Alisa Kinney, Rosa Lee Carter ES
Leo Valentine (3), Amanda Bartleski, Hutchison Farm ES
Clara Mills (3), Nicole Daquilante, Waterford ES
Caleb Potts (2), Jennifer Mangiapanella, Lincoln ES
Emerson Caravantes Aguilar (2), Ariana Murphy, Sully ES
Asha Nalla (1), Kristin Niketic, Liberty ES
Anika Gauldin (K), Marykirk Cunningham, Frederick Douglass ES
Dylan Heron (K), Terry Crosser, Hamilton ES

Nature journaling sits at the intersection of science, literacy, observation, art, environmental education, and social-emotional learning. That’s why it maps so naturally onto what teachers are trying to accomplish with state-directed environmental literacy goals. Virginia’s Science Standards of Learning (SOLs) emphasize observation, investigation, data collection, analysis, and the development of scientific thinking skills through authentic experiences rather than memorization.

The Peterson program provides the vehicle for meeting those standards because it engages students in careful observation, questioning, recording evidence, recognizing patterns, and communicating their discoveries. Far from being an extra or a time filler, the PYNP directly supports Virginia’s science framework goals.

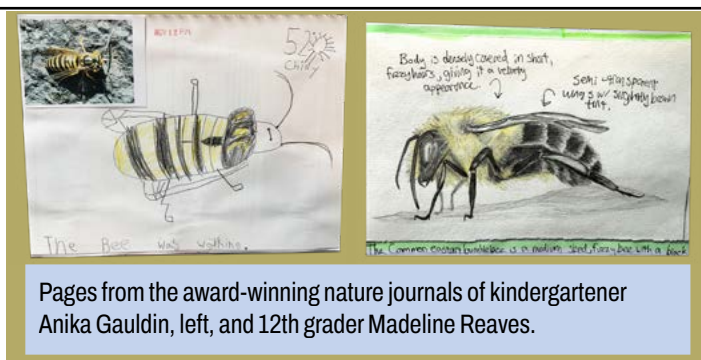
Loudoun Wildlife is proud of that support and the accomplishments of teachers and students who participate.

This year, we honored them at the first ever stand-alone Peterson Young Naturalist Program Awards Celebration, where both students and teachers received recognition from an inspired community for their accomplishments this year. What an amazing turnout, with 120 community members and Loudoun County teachers and administrators gathering to meet these accomplished K-12 students!

Our 20 winners enjoyed individual recognition for excellence in nature journaling (which included cash prizes and certificates for students and outdoor learning tools for teachers) but also gained insight into a newfound affinity for Roger Tory Peterson, America’s pioneering naturalist. His legendary Peterson field guides have shaped decades of community science, and his legacy continues through the founder of the PYNP, Dr. Miriam Westervelt. At the celebration event, Dr. Westervelt spoke about her stepfather’s many contributions to the environment, science, and art.

The teacher-designed lessons and the journaling work of the students are inspiring and beautiful to look at, and our guest speakers thought so, too. Thanks to Dr. Mojisola Adejumo for her words of affirmation and for hosting the event at her school. As principal of Cardinal Ridge Elementary, she knows firsthand the benefits of nature-based learning and ensures that all 900 students have access to the PYNP.

Thanks also to Matt Felperin of Northern Virginia Parks, who brought a special guest, Smoke the Eastern Screech Owl. Matt spoke to the students about the importance of their environmental stewardship. "I know how fun it is for anyone to see Smoke up close," Matt said, "but I just had no idea how inspired I would be by all of you!"



Pages from the award-winning nature journals of kindergartener Anika Gauldin, left, and 12th grader Madeline Reaves.

Volunteer Spotlights

by Monica Skinner, Volunteer Engagement Coordinator

At Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy, we refer to ourselves as a "volunteer-powered" organization, and that power produces amazing impact year after year. The dedication, passion, and love of nature our volunteers exude shape every program and project.

Each month in our monthly e-newsletter, a Volunteer Spotlight recognizes one of those amazing people, and we're proud to present what we plan to be a regular feature in the *Habitat Herald*, recognizing the volunteers we've spotlighted over the last few months.



March: Bruce Adams has quietly supported Loudoun Wildlife for a decade through consistent stream monitoring, restoration work, and hands-on problem solving. Known for his reliability and never-ending energy, he not only collects data but

also clears stream blockages, restores water flow, and helps maintain healthy habitats at JK Black Oak Wildlife Sanctuary. Bruce was recently named "Volunteer of the Year" at our Annual Meeting, and his steady presence strengthens both local ecosystems and our growing volunteer community.

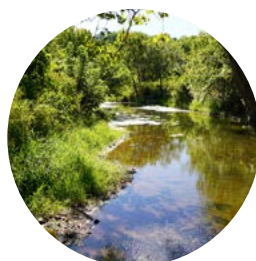
Together, these volunteers show that anyone — no matter their background or knowledge level — can make a lasting, legacy-shaping difference in our natural world. All it takes is finding the place where passion and purpose intersect with opportunity. Thanks to all our volunteers who keep powering our mission to protect, preserve, and restore wildlife habitat.

Read more about each of these Volunteer Spotlight recipients on our website at: <https://loudounwildlife.org/volunteer-opps/>.



April: For Megan Flinn, volunteering is about connection, and she demonstrates that perspective by welcoming people at Loudoun Wildlife events, sharing wildlife sightings, and inspiring curiosity through activities like our October Walk for Wildlife. Growing up near industrial landscapes, Megan carries a strong appreciation for protected natural

spaces and brings that perspective to every interaction. "It's really nice to connect with people who still value the things you cannot buy with money," she says.



May: David Manning's conservation journey started with a Cub Scout demonstration that sparked a fascination with stream life. (In fact, when told we wanted a photo for this profile, Dave suggested using a photo of a stream instead.) Today, he volunteers at JK Black Oak Wildlife Sanctuary, participates in

stream monitoring, and encourages others — especially kids — to discover the wonders of macroinvertebrates and birds. At home, he has spent nearly three decades transforming his yard into a thriving native habitat, reflecting his deep commitment to conservation.



June: Karen Jimenez brings technical skills and youthful passion to stream monitoring and community science. What began as a student project grew into a commitment to protecting waterways, from Salt Watch testing to designing an interactive StoryMap that helps residents understand local *E. coli* data.

Karen especially values the opportunity to contribute meaningful data that helps inform conservation efforts while engaging residents in scientific research and environmental stewardship.



Soft Landings in Your Landscape

by Barbara De Rosa-Joynt



Celandine Poppy (*Stylophorum diphyllum*) carpets the ground under a Buttonbush (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*). Photo by Barbara De Rosa-Joynt

Underplanting — planting beneath trees or shrubs, often with shade-tolerant plants — has been a tried-and-true gardening technique for a long time. So-called soft landings provide an opportunity to take that technique to the next level by selecting plants that support biodiversity in your landscape to intentionally support pollinators and other wildlife.

Soft landings are diverse native plantings under keystone or other native trees or shrubs that provide shelter and habitat for parts of the life cycles of moths, butterflies, bumblebees, fireflies, lacewings, and beetles, among others. They create a safe space for pollinators and other wildlife to overwinter — burrowed underground or nestled in the plants and leaf litter — and cover to hide from predators during the growing season.

Many larvae of lepidoptera (butterflies, moths, and skippers) drop to the ground beneath their host plants to complete their life cycles in the duff (partly decayed organic matter) under or near the host plant or underground. If a caterpillar drops onto pavement, mulch, or turf, it is more likely to be eaten by a predator or smooshed, or to struggle to burrow into compacted soil. Other wildlife will benefit from soft landings too, including chipmunks, toads, frogs, skinks, salamanders, box turtles, birds, and foxes.

Keystone plants are native plants that support considerably more native insect species: just 14% of native host plants collectively feed the caterpillars of 90% of lepidoptera, and some of those are also a source of pollen for specialist bees whose larvae can only eat pollen from specific plants.

The top three keystone native tree genera in our region support an astonishing number of lepidoptera species: oak (*Quercus*), 436 species; plum/cherry (*Prunus*), 340; and birch (*Betula*), 284. The top two keystone shrub genera, willow (*Salix*) and blueberry (*Vaccinium*) support 289 and 217 species respectively; each also supports 14 specialist bee species. Top native perennial keystone genera include goldenrod (*Solidago*, 104 lepidoptera/42 bees) and aster (*Symphyotrichum*, 100 lepidoptera/33 bees), both of which include shade-tolerant species.



Sensitive Fern (*Onoclea sensibilis*), New York Fern (*Amauropelta noveboracensis*) and Jack in the Pulpit (*Arisaema triphyllum*) offer a soft landing beneath a River Birch (*Betula nigra*). Photo by Barbara De Rosa-Joynt

There are some important considerations for anyone who wants to create soft landings for wildlife beneath their own trees.

Do:

- Protect the health of the tree!
- Remove any invasive species.
- Dig with great care to avoid damaging shallow tree roots.
- Use a hand trowel, not a full-size shovel.
- Let the leaves fall naturally and rake other fallen leaves into the area.
- Use plant plugs or other small-size plants; you can even plant seeds. The smaller the root system, the easier it is to tuck it between the tree's roots without inadvertently causing harm.

Do not:

- Dig large holes for plants or use a full-size shovel.
- Dig out turf or use a sod cutter on grass running right up to the trunk. Instead, smother the grass in the fall.
- Create a raised bed under your tree. Adding soil or compost on top of tree roots can affect tree health.
- Plant up against the tree trunk. Plant up to about 3 feet from the trunk and let plants naturally fill in.
- Use landscape fabric.

Barbara De Rosa-Joynt is a Loudoun Extension Master Gardener and Wildlife Sanctuary Ambassador.

Resources:

"Keystone Native Plants," <https://www.nwf.org/-/media/Documents/PDFs/Garden-for-Wildlife/Keystone-Plants/NWF-GFW-keystone-plant-list-ecoregion-8-eastern-temperate-forests.pdf>

"Soft Landings," <https://www.pollinatorsnativeplants.com/softlandings.html>



Programs and Field Trips

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

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

Writing in Nature — First Thursdays, 11:00 am – 1:00 pm (note locations):
August 6 (Rust Library), September 3 (Waterford Foundation), October 1 (Rust Library), November 5 (Waterford Foundation). Join Nancy Morgan, director emeritus of the 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](#).**

Read! Plant! Grow! Book Club — Tuesday, August 25, 6:30 – 8:00 pm, Birch Tree Bookstore, Leesburg. Join our partners Watermark Woods Native Plants, Loudoun County Public Library (LCPL), and Birch Tree Bookstore for this book club that focuses on native plants, co-sponsored by Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy and

LCPL. At this meeting, we'll discuss *The Light Eaters* by Zoe Schlanger, a book about whether plants show something like "intelligence," and the implications for how we view them. To obtain a copy, contact Allison Forbes (Allison.Forbes@loudoun.gov), who will send one to your nearest library for pickup; or purchase it 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.

Beginning a Nature Journal Practice — Saturday, September 5, 2:00 – 3:00 pm, Banshee Reeks. Why keep a nature journal? Whether you're 5 or 95, it's a lens to help focus your attention and enrich your experience of the natural world. Journalers say it helps them discover, think, remember, be curious, have reverence, cultivate joy, make connections — shall we go on?! Join Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy for a creative and playful way to begin a practice that you can enjoy anywhere and anytime. We'll have supplies, but bring a favorite notebook as well as drawing utensils if you like. P.S.: You do not need to be an artist or a naturalist to begin. **Limit 20. Registration required: [Sign Up Online](#).** **Questions:** Contact Tracy Baroody at tbaroody@loudounwildlife.org.



Birding Banshee

Whether you're a beginning birder or an expert, you'll be thrilled by the many bird species you'll find at 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. **Registration required: [Sign Up Online](#).** **Questions:** Contact Joe Coleman at jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org.

Second Saturdays: August 8, September 12, October 10, 8:00 am



Birding Algonkian

Join Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy 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: August 16, September 20, October 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 Conservancy. **Registration required: [Sign Up Online](#).** **Questions:** Contact Joe Coleman at jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org. **Parking fee:** The fee for a standard vehicle is \$10. View fee information at <https://www.dcr.virginia.gov/state-parks/parking-fees>.

Fourth Saturdays: August 22, September 26, October 24, 8:00 am



JK Black Oak Workday — Saturday, September 5, 8:00 – 11:00 am, JK Black Oak Wildlife Sanctuary. Join Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy for habitat restoration projects that include removing invasive plants, 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 repellent 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.

Fall Native Plant Sale — Saturday, September 12, 9:00 am – 2:00 pm, Morven Park main parking lot. Fall is the best time to plant native species — cooler temperatures, reliable rainfall, and reduced heat stress give roots time to establish before spring growth begins. Whether you're adding color, creating wildlife habitat, or restoring balance to your yard, planting in fall sets your garden up for long-term success. At the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy



Native Plant Sale, you'll find a diverse selection of flowers, vines, trees, shrubs, and ferns from five outstanding local nurseries: Hill House Farm & Nursery, Nature By Design, Seven Bends Nursery, Watermark Woods Native Plants, and Yellow House Natives.

Our knowledgeable volunteers will be on hand to help you choose plants suited to your space and goals. Be sure to visit the Native Plant Information Center for expert talks offered throughout the day on topics like native plants for beginners, transitioning to a native garden, and managing invasive species. Enjoy a cup of coffee from a local vendor while you explore tables hosted by our nonprofit partners working to protect and restore native ecosystems. You'll also learn about our programs and how to get involved in local conservation efforts. For updates and full details, visit <https://loudounwildlife.org/events>.

Questions: Contact nativeplantsale@loudounwildlife.org.

Fall Butterfly Walk — Sunday, September 13, 1:00 – 3:00 pm, Murray Hill. Take a leisurely stroll with Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy through formal gardens and open pasture, hedgerows, and woodland. We may see Monarch butterflies on their way south and observe resident butterflies as they prepare for winter. During our walk, we will discuss the role of farmers and gardeners in butterfly survival. This is a family-friendly event. Murray Hill is located just east of Leesburg. **Registration required:** [Sign Up Online](#).

Sweet Run Dawn Bird Walk — Saturday, September 19, 6:30 am, Sweet Run State Park. Not only are birds most active at dawn; if the weather cooperates, there is a beauty and peacefulness to sunrise that fades as the day progresses. Join Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy for this early-morning walk as we explore the park as it awakens and fall is just starting. Fall bird migration will be in progress, and

if we're lucky, we should have both a beautiful and productive walk as we explore some of the park's trails. The group will meet in the main parking lot near the pollinator garden. **Registration required:** [Sign Up Online](#). **Questions:** Contact Joe Coleman at jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org. (See page 13 for Sweet Run parking fee information.)

Volunteer at the Bluemont Fair — Saturday and Sunday, September 19 and 20. Join us at the Bluemont Fair to help promote Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy and all our programs. No experience or prior knowledge is required. Volunteer shift options include: setup, 7:30 – 9:00 am; morning shift, 9:30 am – 12:30 pm; afternoon shift, 12:30 – 3:30 pm; and evening shift, 3:30 – 5:30 pm. We will contact you to arrange shift time. Sign up at <https://loudounwildlife.org/volunteer-opps/>. 8–10 volunteers needed each day. **Questions:** Contact Volunteer Coordinator Monica Skinner at mskinner@loudounwildlife.org.

Walk for Wildlife Fundraiser (October 1 – 31) Kickoff — Saturday, September 26, 12:00 – 3:00 pm, Waterford Foundation. Walk for Wildlife is a monthlong event in which you see how many wildlife places you can visit and how many species in nature (plant/animal) you can identify, using and posting them to the iNaturalist app. This Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy event is a fun way to get outside and observe, on your own or in a group, and you can help support our programs that benefit wildlife and healthy habitats. Want to get all the details about participating? Come by the Waterford Foundation on September 26 to pick up your T-shirt, see some friends, ask questions, learn about iNaturalist, and get excited to Walk for Wildlife! Learn more at <https://loudounwildlife.org/walk-for-wildlife/>.



Hail to the Trail — Sunday, September 27, 1:00 – 4:00 pm, Chapman DeMary Trail. Hail to the Trail — the annual Purcellville Green Expo — celebrates environmental recreation, exploration, and education and is hosted by the Town of Purcellville's Tree and Environmental Sustainability Committee. This event is free and open to the public, and is great for families, students, and Scouts. You can explore this 10-acre area, meet local environmental experts, participate in fun hands-on activities, help plant trees, get supplies to start your own nature journal, listen to live music, and participate in the Town's annual Arbor Day Celebration. Stop by Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy's table to play the frog jump game and learn about amphibians, reptiles, and native plants. Visit <https://www.purcellvilleva.gov/999/Hail-to-the-Trail> for more information.

Loudoun's Birds of Prey — Wednesday, September 30, 7:00 pm, Rust Library. Birds of prey intrigue many of us, and every fall and winter their numbers increase dramatically in our county as our resident birds are joined by many others. Learn how to identify the different species and their habits and some of the places to find them with raptor expert and falconer Liam McGranaghan. The presentation is sponsored by the Loudoun County Public Library and Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy. **Registration requested:** [Sign Up Online](#).

JK Black Oak Workday — Saturday, October 3, 8:30 – 11:30 am, JK Black Oak Wildlife Sanctuary. See September 5 for details.

Walk for Wildlife at JK Black Oak — Sunday, October 4, 10:00 am – 12:00 pm, JK Black Oak Wildlife Sanctuary. Kick off Walk for Wildlife with a group walk with Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy leaders to find species that call the sanctuary home. This unique property features late-season blooms, vernal pools (which will be dry this time of year), meadows,

and mature forests that should provide us a rich selection of insects, herps, migrating birds, and plants. Curious about using iNaturalist and participating in Walk for Wildlife? Curious about the JK Black Oak property? Then this is the walk for you. Directions will be emailed to registered participants. **Limit 15. Registration required:** [Sign Up Online](#). **Note:** Due to the environmentally sensitive habitat and rare species, JK Black Oak is not open for general public access.

Beginning a Nature Journal Practice — Sunday, October 4, 2:00 – 3:00 pm, Banshee Reeks. See September 5 for details.

The Big Sit at Algonkian Park — Saturday, October 10, 7:00 am – 7:00 pm. Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy is excited to be partnering with NOVA Parks for another Big Sit at Algonkian Regional Park. Join us for five minutes or all day as we compete with other birders around the world to see and hear as many bird species as we can from within a 17-foot circle! We'll also have info about other Loudoun Wildlife programs and events and a visit from live ambassador animals from NOVA Parks.

What is a Big Sit? Some people have compared it to a tailgate party for birders. It is a worldwide annual competition to see how many species of birds can be seen from one stationary location in 24 hours or less.

Who should attend? Anyone interested in birding from beginner to advanced. If you're new to birding, you can learn more about it and meet other birders. If you're an experienced birder, bring your skills and help us ID some species. This is a stationary location, so it's great for people who aren't interested in a long bird walk. Plus, we'll be there all day, so it's great for those who prefer to sleep late.

We will be set up close to the parking lot just west of the boat ramp, with views of the river, a



wildflower meadow, a grassy field, a wooded tree line, and wide open sky. We will be there from 7:00 am to 7:00 pm to count as many bird species as we can see or hear. You can stop by for a few minutes to say hi or bring a chair and stay as long as you like. *No registration required.*
Questions: Contact Patrick Lewis at plewis@loudounwildlife.org.

In case of inclement weather, cancellation information will be posted on our website and on the Loudoun Wildlife Facebook page. There are also volunteer opportunities for this event; see details at <https://loudounwildlife.org/volunteer-oppo/>.

Birding Broad Run Stream Valley Park — Saturday, October 17, 8:00 am. Join Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy in search of birds at this surprisingly rich park along Broad Run, which combines several different habitat types, including a rich flood plain on both sides of the stream, edge and meadow habitat, and multiple ponds. The varied habitat should provide the group with a good variety of migrating birds, from shorebirds to warblers, as well as residents. Parking information will be emailed to registered participants. *Limit 15. Registration required: [Sign Up Online](#).*

Walk for Wildlife at Morven Park — Saturday, October 17, 10:00 am – 12:00 pm. Join Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy's Jim McWalters to get outside and take a walk in nature. Morven Park has beautiful ridge trails with vernal pools and mature forest that should provide a variety of insects, amphibians, birds, and plants. *Limit 15; family-friendly. Registration required: [Sign Up Online](#).*

Fall Color Walk — Saturday, October 24, 10:00 am – 12:00 pm, Balls Bluff Regional Park. As the days get cooler and frost is in the air, deciduous trees and shrubs put on an autumn show in all shades of red, yellow, orange, and purple. Join Bill Cour and Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy for a walk in the woods to enjoy all the colors that Mother Nature provides this time of year. We'll discuss various tree species and why trees change their color in the fall. *Limit 20; family-friendly. Registration required: [Sign Up Online](#).*

Identifying Hawks: A Field Trip to Waggoner's Gap, Pa. — Sunday, October 25. Each fall, hawks migrate south along the Blue Ridge. Join Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy on a field trip to Waggoner's Gap, about a 2.5-hour drive, one of the premier hawk-watching sites in our area. If the weather cooperates, we should see a wide diversity of birds of prey, including Golden Eagles! John Denice, who will be leading the field trip, will help you identify hawks and other birds of prey in the field. In case of inclement weather, the field trip will be rescheduled to either November 7 or 8. While the field trip is free, *Registration required: [Sign Up Online](#). Questions: Contact jdenice@loudounwildlife.org.*

JK Black Oak Workday — Saturday, November 7, 9:00 am – 12:00 pm, JK Black Oak Wildlife Sanctuary. See September 5 for details.



"Give me a field where the unmow'd grass grows..."

— Walt Whitman



Trinity Mills (left), Loudoun Wildlife's conservation advocacy specialist, chats with members who stop by her information table on Annual Meeting day. Photo by Sheri Knauer

Annual Meeting continued from page 7

During the first session, we delivered a record six annual awards, including the Mission Matters Award (presented to Michele Savage for her work editing the *Habitat Herald*), Advocate of the Year (Nan McCarry), Partner of the Year (Watermark Woods Native Plants owner Julie Borneman), the Youth Conservation Award (Aila McGregor), Volunteer of the Year (Bruce Adams), and the Joe Coleman Award (Brian Magurn).

It felt so satisfying being able to give these valued friends and supporters what they don't get nearly enough of: heartfelt public acknowledgement of all they so freely give to this organization.

The first session ended with a rousing keynote from Dr. Mamie Parker, former Head of Fisheries for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, who delivered a powerful message about resilience in the face of challenges.

The second session included staff, Board, and program leadership recognition; door prizes; and the much-anticipated Birdathon awards. (This year's Birdathon shattered participation records with 54 teams — far surpassing the goal of 20 — and raised nearly \$26,000 to support our work!)

The session also included a brief business meeting, confirmation of three new Board members, raffle and sponsor prizes, and a closing video showcasing the 30-year legacy of this still-growing organization.

It was a day to celebrate the past, take pride in the present, and focus on the future with passion and purpose. We're so thankful to everyone — whether you were there in person or in spirit — who made the day possible.

For a full recap, visit: <https://loudounwildlife.org/2026/06/historic-annual-meeting-celebrates-a-milestone-year/>.



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Katydid on Evening Primrose
at the Harrison Street Meadow in
Leesburg. Photo by BJ Lechrone

