



# OAK LEAF

A NEWSLETTER FOR MEMBERS AND FRIENDS OF THE NORTHERN SHENANDOAH VALLEY AUDUBON SOCIETY

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## Connect With Nature And Your Community

### Guided Nature Walks – Free and Open to the Public

Learn about local wildlife and their habitat on these leisurely walks with seasoned naturalists Jim Smith and Margaret Wester.

#### Abrams Creek Wetlands Preserve - Winchester, VA

Jim has been walking the Abrams Creek area for decades and is a wealth of knowledge about the birds and wildlife that frequent the area. Join Jim and other birders to discover hidden treasures in the heart of Winchester!

**Walk Dates:** Saturday, March 29th • Saturday, April 12th • Saturday, April 26th • Saturday, May 10th

**Start Time:** 8:30 AM

**Time Required:** Approximately 2 hours

**Meet:** Children of America parking lot off of W. Jubal Early Drive, approximately 1/2 mile west of Valley Avenue. Park at the west side of the lot by the woods. If you arrive a few minutes late, simply walk the path until you catch up with the group.

In the event of inclement weather, walks will be cancelled. For more information, contact Jim Smith at (540) 303-3983.

► Birding at Abrams Creek with Jim Smith.



◀ A scene from the Shearman's Mill Trail at Sky Meadows during a nature walk with Margaret Wester.

#### Sky Meadows State Park - Delaplane, VA

Margaret is a Master Naturalist and can often be found at Sky Meadows volunteering or working on her Bluebird Trail. Join her and others each season for an educational experience!

##### SPRING:

**Date/Time:** April 19, 9:00 AM – 11:00 AM

**Theme:** Migrating Birds and Emerging Spring Plants

**Trail:** Snowden

**Length:** 1.5 miles round trip

**Meet:** Visitor's Center

##### SUMMER:

**Date/Time:** June 28, 9:00 AM – 11:00 AM

**Theme:** Birds of Meadow and Shrub Habitat

**Trail:** Rolling Meadows

**Meet:** Lost Mountain Parking Lot

**Length:** 2.25 miles round trip

##### FALL:

**Date/Time:** October 18, 10:00 AM – 12:00 PM

**Theme:** Red-Headed Woodpeckers & Bluebirds: Natural and Manmade Habitats

**Trail:** Woodpecker Lane/Gap Run

**Meet:** Visitor's Center

**Length:** 2 miles round trip

##### WINTER:

**Date/Time:** December 13, 9:00 AM – 11:00 AM

**Theme:** Resident and Winter Birds

**Trail:** Shearman's Mill

**Meet:** Lost Mountain Parking Lot

**Length:** 1 mile round trip

State Park parking fees apply (\$4.00 per vehicle). Please contact Margaret with any questions at [margaretwester@hotmail.com](mailto:margaretwester@hotmail.com) (preferred) or (540) 837-2799.





*Our last winter newsletter featured an article about Sam and Jean Patten. One of Sam's proudest achievements was the bluebird trail that he and Charlie Clevenger established at Blandy Experimental Farm in 1994. This issue will focus on the trail's evolution over the last 10 years.*

## A DECADE ON THE SHENANDOAH AUDUBON/BLANDY BLUEBIRD TRAIL

By Kaycee Lichliter

### COMMITMENT

In 2001 while studying at Lord Fairfax Community College to earn an associate's degree in Natural Resource Management, I heard about a gentleman who loved bluebirds. Next thing I knew, I was shadowing this fellow, Colonel Sam Patten, through the fields at Blandy. He was showing me all sorts of birds and nests and eggs. I was mesmerized. In 2003, Sam bestowed trail management to me, and I learned how a passion has the ability to capture one's inner being, how it can consume every cell, and how it can create a drive like the powering force of a steam engine. My brain starting working and ideas exploded. I knew immediately I needed help and appealed to two friends and fellow birders, Mr. Glenn Comer and Mr. Greg Baruffi, to assist with the project.



▲ Kaycee Lichliter and the late Greg Baruffi working on the trail. This photo originally appeared in the Virginia Bluebird Society's *Bird Box* October 2005 newsletter.

### REVAMPING

After gaining permission from The University of Virginia to continue to utilize the farmland, Greg and I immediately began canvassing Blandy Farm and taking inventory. We mapped out the trails and assigned permanent box positions, and with Glenn's assistance, we removed, refurbished, or replaced worn out boxes. We started advertising and growing a volunteer base of interested citizens to train as field technicians. We knew we needed a set protocol to follow for a project of this size, so one snowy day in February, Greg and I made the journey to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology in Ithaca, New York. We were fortunate to spend several hours with Dr. Tina Phillips, project leader of The Birdhouse Network, a Citizen Science Project. By bringing home sound advice from Tina and by tapping the resources of the Virginia Bluebird Society, we sat down and wrote our protocol manual and created forms and documents for monitoring at Blandy. We insisted on mandatory workshops for all volunteers to provide each with the education and tools to observe and document consistent and accurate field data.

### SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE BIRDS

When a trail is established, whether it is 1 box or 110, placement and guards must be given serious consideration. Predators such as raccoons, snakes, cats and chipmunks can devastate a nest of eggs, hatchlings or even adults if the box is not properly protected. For this reason, it is not advisable to put up housing to attract birds if safety features and monitoring are not in place. At Blandy, the current stovepipe guards have proven most effective. Although they may look a little offensive to the eye, they help produce those bright blue, cheery little bluebirds that greet us while walking through the Arboretum. Functionality is the key, and the safety of the birds is top priority.

Glenny and Greg, with advice from Sam and Charlie, altered our boxes to open hinged at the bottom for easy access. We enlarged the roof on many boxes to help prevent predation and erected the boxes on metal posts instead of wooden ones. We installed security screws to prevent unauthorized and untimely box opening, which could disrupt the nesting cycle and cause nest failure.

### RESEARCH

With our first two objectives, education and providing habitat for our native cavity-nesting birds, well underway, our next goal was research. Here the project began to get even more interesting and time-consuming. Dr. Caren Cooper, Research Assistant at Cornell University, invited our trail to be part of an Incubation Rhythm Study. With assistance from several volunteers, I positioned dime-sized data loggers in nest cups alongside clutches of eggs for three breeding seasons (2005 through 2007). These tiny data loggers were placed and retrieved at specific times. Upon retrieval, they were taken to my computer where the information was downloaded and transmitted to Cornell. The data loggers produced temperature graphs at specified intervals that indicated female incubation behavior, such as when and how many times she left the nest and how long she was gone. Researchers already knew that bluebirds generally lay more eggs from south to north and east to west, and also lay larger clutches at the beginning of the season than near the end. The hypothesis from these studies suggested that "in warm weather, eggs in large clutches are more likely to develop abnormally than eggs in small clutches because of prolonged exposure to suboptimal temperatures" (Cooper 2003). Our part on the Blandy Trail with the Incubation Rhythm Study assisted in gathering data to better understand egg



▲ A data logger used in the Incubation Rhythm Study.

development. Dr. Cooper has since written various research papers on the subject, and on April 24, 2007, she visited our community to present a lecture on the study at Shenandoah University. The trail also attracted the attention of a graduate student, Ms. Sarah Rockwell, from the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center. She collected brachial vein blood samples, tail feather pulls and toenail clippings for one season to study aspects of bluebird migration.



Before I was involved with the trail, Mr. Ron Salmon initiated a bird banding study with Sam and Charlie. As I became even more engrossed and earned my master bander certification, I inherited the banding project from Ron. Sponsorship continued with master bander Mr. David Mitchell and the Virginia Bluebird Society. A total of 18 adult and 1,135 Eastern Bluebird chicks were banded between 2001 and 2011; 465 were given color bands to allow individual bird ID in the field. Unfortunately, this Virginia Bluebird Society study has lapsed since 2012.

After each nesting season (March through August), I interpret and summarize data collected from monitoring and submit it to the following institutions: The Cornell Lab of Ornithology, The NestWatch Program, the Virginia Bluebird Society, Blandy Experimental Farm, and when applicable, the USGS Bird Banding Lab in Patuxent, Maryland.



▲ Glenny Comer and Kaycee Lichliter band in the back of a Gator at Blandy. Photo ©Marie & Milan Majarov.

Over the last 10 years, there have been a total of 1,959 nesting attempts (a nest in which at least one egg has been laid). 1,750 Eastern Bluebirds, 2,665 Tree Swallows, 1,906 House Wrens and 23 Carolina Chickadees have fledged on the trail, totaling 6,344 birds.



▲ A newly banded Eastern Bluebird chick. Photo ©Marie & Milan Majarov.

## ANTICIPATING THE FUTURE

We were devastated to lose Colonel Sam Patten in March of 2007. Sam was always eager to share his experience and wisdom. He supplied us with an abundance of good judgment and sound advice.



▲ Deveney Hagan Quinney gets a lift from the late Greg Baruffi. Photo by Kaycee Lichliter.



In December of that same year, we lost Mr. Greg Baruffi in a traffic accident. Greg always kept us looking forward to future possibilities and reminded us that we had no limits. His wit and good-natured, playful sarcasm will always be missed. In September 2011, Mr. Glenny Comer fell from a ladder, making it difficult for him to maneuver the rolling fields of Blandy Farm. He had mastered the art of trail maintenance and spent countless hours in the field making sure the boxes were in great condition. Glenny still provides emotional support and is always a morale booster. We look forward to his return to active duty in the future. Mr. Chris Lewis has since graciously offered his carpentry skills and now performs all trail maintenance at Blandy, including box cleanout each spring.

In 2011, Ms. Margaret Wester diverted her time and attention from the Blandy Trail to begin a new bluebird trail at Sky Meadows State Park. I lent a hand to Margaret with field work, protocol and workshop information. We decided to combine our recruitment and workshop training efforts and consider Blandy and Sky Meadows 'Sister Trails.'

Even as I am observing an ice storm outside my window right now, I am imagining the rolling fields at Blandy, with Tree Swallows playing with fluffy white feathers as they build their nests, and gatherings with folks who share my common interest of birds. I give gracious thanks to each and every volunteer who has offered their time and dedication in making this trail project a success.

I would like to invite you to join us as we continue to provide much needed habitat for our native cavity nesters. The average trail technician documents 12 to 15 total hours in the field per season. Some enjoy the experience so much that they request even more time.

Training workshops are mandatory for both new and well-seasoned veterans. Upcoming workshop dates and times are listed below.

When following a passion, we never know where it will take us. I can say that if I strolled through the Virginia State Arboretum this morning, I would surely be greeted by our beautiful bluebirds, and folks, that's what it's all about.

## BLUEBIRD TRAIL TRAINING WORKSHOPS

### Bluebird Trail Training/Recap for Veterans:

Saturday, March 8, 2014, 9:00 AM to 11:00 AM

### Bluebird Trail Training for New Volunteers:

Wednesday, March 12, 2014, 7:00 PM to 9:00 PM

Both workshops will be held in the Library at Blandy Experimental Farm, 400 Blandy Lane, Boyce, VA 22620. Please register in advance with Kaycee Lichliter, [kayceelichliter@hotmail.com](mailto:kayceelichliter@hotmail.com) (preferred) or (540) 664-9596.

Training is free, but pre-registration is required.



# THANK YOU!



In December, Shenandoah Audubon received a very generous donation from an anonymous donor. The donation will be used to improve the Audubon Arboretum, which is located in Winchester on Pleasant Valley Road adjacent to Jim Barnett Park.

The Arboretum is almost 15 years old and has great potential for being an attractive educational destination in the future. If you are interested in helping us with our plans to improve this space, please contact Jim Smith at (540) 303-3983.

**SHENANDOAH AUDUBON**  
**PO BOX 2693**  
**WINCHESTER, VA 22604**



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A Cackling Goose (center with short bill) among Canada Geese, spotted during the Calmes Neck Christmas Bird Count.

Photo by Mike Friedman

## Christmas Bird Count Results

Thanks to all who participated in the Northern Shenandoah Valley and Calmes Neck Christmas Bird Counts! Both count dates had their fair share of winter weather, but determined volunteers endured and counted as many birds as they could.

The Northern Shenandoah Valley count was held Saturday, December 14. 90 species and 28,250 individual birds were counted. The highlight was a Peregrine Falcon spotted at Blandy by Judy Masi & David Carr. Other notable species counted were Virginia Rail, Marsh Wren, Pine Siskin, Rough-Legged Hawk and Common Loon.

Participants in the Calmes Neck Count Circle held Sunday, January 5, counted 14,839 individual birds. Of the 82 species seen, highlights include Cackling Goose, Long-Tailed Duck, Red-Breasted Merganser, Common Loon, Ring-Billed Gull, Ruby-Crowned Kinglet and Red-Breasted Nuthatch.

To check national results as they are tabulated, visit  
<http://birds.audubon.org/data-research>



Please recycle.

