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Contents	Page
Blitzing for Rusty Blackbirds in West Virginia	
—John Boback	62
Common Merganser and Common Raven Breeding in Brooke County West Virginia	
—Albert R. Buckelew Jr.	65
Bird Nests in Three West Virginia Yards	
—Marjorie Keatley.....	67
Field Notes	
—Casey Rucker.....	76

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Blitzing for Rusty Blackbirds in West Virginia

John Boback

Rusty Blackbird populations are plummeting throughout North America and nobody knows exactly why. In the last half century, the number of Rusties has fallen by a staggering 85% to 95%, which makes them one of our most rapidly declining species of birds. For many decades, nobody even realized that the species was in peril. Then in the 1990s, the late ornithologist Russell Greenberg discovered the Rusty Blackbird's negative population trend by analyzing data from citizen science projects such as the North American Breeding Bird Surveys and Christmas Bird Counts. Greenberg subsequently founded the International Rusty Blackbird Working Group (IRBWG), which conducts research into every aspect of Rusty Blackbird biology. The ultimate goal of the IRBWG is to develop conservation and management strategies aimed at reversing the bird's precipitous population decline.

The habitat preferences of the Rusty Blackbird make field research on the species somewhat challenging. Rusties have an affinity for wooded swamps, marshes, and other hard-to-access wet areas. During the summer breeding season, Rusties inhabit spruce bogs in Canada and Alaska where they feed on aquatic insects and other invertebrates. Then in the fall, Rusties migrate to their wintering grounds in the southeast United States where they seek out wooded swamps and marshes. Fortunately for birders and researchers, Rusties also visit roadside ditches, wet lawns, agricultural fields, and bird feeders while out foraging during winter days.

Despite the physical difficulty of accessing the Rusty Blackbird's preferred swampy habitat, researchers have in recent decades learned much about the bird's biology and ecological relationships. Unfortunately, the cause of their dramatic population loss remains elusive. In fact, the problem might not even be attributable to a single cause. Instead, the species may be facing several unrelated challenges, which are collectively causing their population to crash. Some of the current hypotheses explaining their decline include habitat loss in their wintering grounds; competition in their breeding territories from more aggressive Red-winged Blackbirds and Common Grackles; environmental methyl-mercury poisoning on their breeding grounds; and possibly climate change, which may be lowering the standing water levels in the northern bogs where they breed. In this atmosphere of uncertainty, the one thing that is clear is that additional research into the lives of Rusty Blackbirds needs to be done.

One of the least understood aspects of the Rusty Blackbird's lifecycle involves their migration. What specific migration routes do Rusties follow? Do they follow the same route from year to year? Do they have preferred stopover areas, and if so, where are these stopover areas located? These are big questions that would be difficult to answer without an army of researchers. Fortunately, such an army exists in the form of the na-



Most of the rust-colored feather tips seen on this springtime male Rusty Blackbird wear away prior to the breeding season. Photo by Dale Carlson.

tion's thousands of birders. In the spring of 2014, the IRBWG launched a three-year-long citizen science project entitled the Rusty Blackbird Spring Migration Blitz. During the Blitz years of 2014–2016, birders are being asked to actively search for migrating Rusties during designated windows of time and to report their findings to eBird. The blitz period for West Virginia is the entire month of March, although observers are encouraged to report every Rusty Blackbird seen throughout the year.

With the first two Rusty Blackbird Blitz years now complete, West Virginia birders have already contributed dozens of valuable migration reports to the project. During the March 2014 Blitz period, birders in the Mountain State submitted 24 Rusty Blackbird reports to eBird, with the largest reported flock of approximately 150 Rusties being found by Deborah Hale on March 23 at Altona Marsh in Jefferson County. Rodney Bartgis also located a sizable flock of 75 Rusty Blackbirds intermixed with Red-winged Blackbirds on March 29 at Valley Bend Wildlife Management Area in Randolph County. During the recently completed March 2015 Rusty Blackbird Blitz, West Virginia birders submitted 48 reports of Rusty Blackbirds to eBird with Casey Rucker finding the largest flock of 65 birds on March 26 at Canaan Valley State Park in Tucker County. Even a cursory look at the Blitz data reveals that flocks of 50 or more Rusty Blackbirds are rather uncommon in West Virginia during spring migration. Birders far more typically see flocks of 10 or fewer Rusties in West Virginia during the month of March.

Aside from collecting the dates and sizes of migratory flocks of Rusty Blackbirds, the Spring Migration Blitz also seeks to identify the location of important stopover points. It is already clear after just two Blitz years that Altona Marsh in Jefferson County and the Upper Deckers Creek watershed of Preston County are two of the most consistently reliable spots in West Virginia to see Rusty Blackbirds during their spring migration. There are undoubtedly additional important stopover points scattered throughout the state; however, more data will be needed to demonstrate that Rusty Blackbirds actually use those locations regularly. The birding community in West Virginia will have an opportunity next March to provide this much-needed data by actively searching for and reporting Rusty Blackbirds during the third and final Blitz period. We hope the knowledge gained through our collective effort will lead to the development of conservation strategies that will save the Rusty Blackbird from its current plight.

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Common Merganser and Common Raven Breeding in Brooke County, West Virginia

Albert R. Buckelew Jr.

Two species usually associated with more northern or mountain habitats have been expanding their ranges in West Virginia in recent years. Both the Common Merganser and Common Raven now breed across West Virginia from the mountains to the Ohio River Valley. This spring I found breeding evidence for both species in Bethany, Brooke County, along Buffalo Creek, thus establishing both as breeding species in the West Virginia Northern Panhandle.

For the past three years, I have observed pairs of Common Mergansers along Buffalo Creek in Brooke County in March and April. In early April 2015, I saw pair bonding behaviors and territorial defense for five pairs established along the Creek between McKinleyville and Bethany. On June 11 William Hicks found a female Common Merganser with 13 small, downy young in Buffalo Creek near the bridge on the east side of Bethany. This number of young observed is close to the typical clutch number for this species of 9 to 12 eggs (Pearce, Mallory, & Metz, 2015).

Common Ravens have long bred in the West Virginia mountains, and recently they have been expanding their range to the west. (Smith, 2008; McClure & Ellis, 2013). My wife, Susan, and I have been hearing and seeing Common Ravens flying over our home and perched in our trees in Bethany since the fall of 2013. At first I believed that they were nesting in a remote, mature forest south of town. I asked a Bethany College student to try to find a nest, but no nest was discovered. Last December we reported hearing Common Ravens in Bethany on our local Christmas Bird Count. We heard persistent raven calls from the direction of a ridge south of Bethany, but I did not try to find a nest. Then a neighbor, Nathan Reven, told me that he had found the nest under a highway bridge over Buffalo Creek in town, also to the south of our home, on May 5, 2015.

On May 5 the nest had three large young, and by May 13, on my first visit, there were two large young ravens still on the nest. Presumably one of the three young fledged between May 5 and May 13. The large nest, which appeared to be constructed of sticks, was about 40 feet above the banks of Buffalo Creek on an I-beam under the bridge. The side of the nest and the concrete support below had many streaks of white fecal matter. When I approached the nest, an adult raven flew off. Two of them perched in a nearby tree and insulted me with many of their loud and varied calls. One flew up into the air and an American Crow took off after it and harassed it. The differences in shape of the tail, head, bill, and size between the raven and crow were easy to compare. A few days later the remaining two ravens had fledged, and we saw and heard the adults and young around our street for about two weeks after that.

I was surprised at the nest location under a highway bridge where local people often fished, but the substrate for Common Raven nests varies considerably from remote cliffs and trees to bridges along highways and other structures, usually with good cover such as a rock overhang, or as in the case of the Bethany nest, the highway above. Typically the average clutch of raven eggs is 5.4. The eggs hatch asynchronously, generally a day or so apart, so it isn't surprising that we observed three young in the nest and only two a few days later (Boarman & Heinrich, 1999).

It seems wonderful to have species that not so long ago we associated with wilderness—Common Mergansers, Bald Eagles, and Common Ravens—flying overhead on our street in Bethany in the West Virginia Northern Panhandle.

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Bird Nests in Three West Virginia Yards

Marjorie Keatley

For several years, a pair of Carolina Wrens built their nests in a hanging gourd on the front porch of my parents' home in Indian Mills, Summers County. The wrens provided hours of entertainment, flying to the edge of the porch, singing or calling, hopping the length of the porch—often going between the feet of whomever was sitting there—flying onto a chair, then to the nest. The presence of people did not seem to alarm them. Occasionally, they used a hanging flower basket for a nest site and one year they nested in the mailbox, but most often they used the gourd.

Three years ago Tree Swallows discovered the gourd, and the wrens did not use the porch for nesting for the next couple of years. The swallows also seemed unconcerned with the presence of people and often used the flagpole attached to the porch as a perch. The second year, the swallows nested twice in the gourd, adding to the first nest and raising its height above the opening. When the second brood began to move around, they were often found on the porch floor, in the rhododendron bush against the porch, and even on the ground. We would return them to the gourd, only to find them once again out of the nest. Finally, my father installed a piece of wire mesh across the front of the nest, securing it with duct tape. After that, the young swallows remained in the nest until they fledged. The swallows did not use the porch last year, nor did the wrens.



Tree Swallow nest in gourd. Photo by Marjorie Keatley.

Last summer a female Baltimore Oriole came to the porch glider cushions to pull out stuffing for nest material. To protect the cushions, my father placed a pile of assorted strings, yarn, and bailer twine on the glider and we enjoyed a few days of watching the oriole select strings. The oriole did not seem to notice the people on the porch. A Tufted Titmouse also was seen pulling stuffing from the pillow.



Female Baltimore Oriole with strings for nest material. Photo by Marjorie Keatley.

This spring Carolina Chickadees nested in a small, molded-plastic birdhouse attached to a porch post. The hummingbird feeder is about a foot away, and the gourd is about 20 inches away. There is a large rhododendron bush against the porch and level with the top of the banisters, just under the gourd, birdhouse, and feeder. A robin built a nest in the rhododendron and laid four eggs. I watched one robin sit on the 3-day-old nestlings and the other perch on the edge of the nest with its wings spread over the nestlings during a hard rain.

Tree Swallow pairs selected a nest box in the backyard and a nest box in the pasture and a pair had checked out the gourd, but the gourd was still empty until about the time the robin eggs hatched. A pair of swallows began to sit in the gourd as if they were guarding it and then began to build. The robins, chickadees, and swallows seemed not to mind living in such close quarters. The chickadees and robins were busily feeding young while the swallows worked on their nest. While the swallows were in the nest building and incubating stages and the robins and chickadees were feeding young, Ruby-throated Hummingbirds used the feeder nearby. After there were fledglings in the swallow nest,



Tree Swallow nest gourd, hummingbird feeder, and Carolina Chickadee nest box. Photo by Marjorie Keatley.

the adult swallows often chased the hummingbirds away from the feeder. Both adult swallows would often fly into the gourd at the same time. The chickadees and robins fledged successfully. The five swallows have since fledged as well. Thus far, the gourd has not been used again this summer.

Also this spring, Carolina Wrens returned to the porch for the first time in a few years and began building a nest on the glider. My mother's caregiver cleaned out the "mess," not realizing it was the beginning of a nest. The wren then found a tunnel on the porch swing behind the cushions and built a nest about two thirds of the way across the swing. The birds entered from the edge of the swing and worked their way to the nest. My father placed a large "Do Not Disturb Carolina Wren Nest Under Cushion" sign on the swing to protect the nest, which had four eggs. The wrens successfully raised a brood.

After the robins fledged their brood from the nest in the rhododendron, robins built a nest on a low limb of the apple tree near the back yard fence. That nest was destroyed by a Blue Jay. Another robin nest was built high in a maple tree in the yard, and these robins were feeding young. These may or may not have been the robins that built the rhododendron nest. Gray Catbirds that used that maple for nesting last year moved across the yard to the other maple tree this year.

In Charleston, we have been adding trees and shrubs and working to enrich the soil of our yard for the past few years. We have left tree stumps, dead trees, and oak logs;



Carolina Wren nest under porch swing cushions. Photo by Marjorie Keatley.

and we avoid the use of chemicals for weed or pest control. There are several flower beds, raised vegetable beds, rock walls, and a row of stacked firewood. There are three bird baths and multiple feeders. We have noticed an increase in bird species and in the number of birds.

We have had Northern Cardinal and Song Sparrow nests (both destroyed), and two years of mostly unsuccessful Carolina Chickadee nests (destroyed by house wrens, we think). Eastern Bluebirds built twice in a nest box the first year we lived here and successfully fledged young. Tufted Titmouse eggs in that same nest box were destroyed two years ago by a tree company worker who moved the nest box to “protect” it, resulting in broken eggs. Carolina Wrens built a nest in the stack of firewood on the driveway one year. This year, Carolina Chickadees inspected the nest box used by chickadees last year in which we had found two dead nestlings, but did not use the box. They or another pair started a nest in the same box but did not continue with it. We put up a third nest box on a Sunday evening and within 10 minutes, a pair of Carolina Chickadees inspected it. They were busily taking nest material into the box on Monday morning; when I returned Tuesday evening, the nest was completed.

Across the yard from the chickadee nest box, Tufted Titmice selected the box that they had used two years before and this time fledged young. The House Wrens, as usual, came late to the yard and selected the abandoned chickadee box with nest material. The predator guard that we installed on this box, thinking it would stop House Wrens from building as they wouldn’t be able to get sticks through the longer entrance, did not deter them. They sat in the hole of their “veranda” and viewed the world outside. They also

successfully fledged young. I used a flashlight to peer into the box at one point and could see two young. There may have been more.

We attached a metal guard to the front roof overhang of the active chickadee nest box once we saw the adults feeding young. The adults returned with food shortly after we attached the guard, seemed curious about this new addition, then flew into the house to feed the nestlings. The guard did not seem to bother them. After seeing an adult come to the nest with food one evening, fly to the hole, peer in, repeat this behavior several times, then leave with the food, I checked the nest and found one dead nestling on the nest platform (the nest filled the box and was level on top, with the nest cup in the far right corner). The nestling had a wiry string and some other material in its mouth. It did not appear to have been dead long. It appeared to be near fledging. We did not see other chickadees fledge, nor did we see or hear young chickadees around the yard at that time. We later observed juvenile chickadees being fed, but do not know if they were from this brood. I removed the dead nestling and cleaned out the box.

For the second year, Eastern Bluebirds have selected an “apartment” in the Purple Martin house in our neighbor’s yard. Prior to that, they built in our yard or in the neighbor’s nest box against our fence. This year’s brood fledged successfully. A second nest was begun in the same martin house. For several days, the male bluebird attacked its



Carolina Chickadee nest removed from nest box. Photo by Marjorie Keatley.

reflected “rival” in the windows of the neighbor’s house or would fly to our windows and do the same, assuming a flattened posture when it saw me, or sitting on the window ledge after it tired and singing softly as I talked to it. However, I did not observe a regular pattern of activity with this second use of the martin house. I do not know if the bluebirds abandoned the nest, or whether this was the same pair, as I had not seen the male from the first pair attacking the windows. Soon after this, a pair of bluebirds examined the original bluebird box in our yard (the one used earlier this summer by titmice). I had removed the titmouse nest and the door was slightly open. The bluebirds examined the box more than once then left. I closed the door and within 30 minutes they had returned to examine the box again. Shortly after that, the female began collecting nest material and soon began incubating eggs.

After the House Wrens fledged, the male inspected the now-empty chickadee box and the nest box on the neighbor’s fence. It began placing sticks in the fence nest box. I covered the chickadee box (to discourage the wrens), and after the wren left the area, covered the fence box as well. After a couple of days, I removed both covers and before long the wren was back and putting sticks in both boxes. There were also spider egg cases



Purple Martin nest box used by Eastern Bluebirds. Photo by Marjorie Keatley.

in the chickadee box nest. (I could not see in the other nest box.) I could not determine if the wren had a mate as there were two wrens at times, in and out of the boxes, but there had been no steady nest building. The nest in the chickadee box was progressing,



Tufted Titmouse nest removed from nest box. Photo by Marjorie Keatley.

then the wrens seemed to leave. Periodically, the male wren returned, sang, and was seen going into the boxes. I noted that one of the “sticks” in the chickadee box nest was a black zip tie that I had lost. The male wren was quite vocal when we would be too close to the fence nest box and would also scold when we were near the chickadee box; however, later it stopped that behavior so we assumed that a female wren had not selected one of the nests.

A trip out of town and heavy rain prevented close monitoring of the nest boxes. More than two weeks later, I was working near the chickadee box; an adult House Wren appeared in the box entrance then flew. I checked the nest and felt at least five eggs. The nest in this box was apparently finished or almost finished when I had last observed it, and had either been selected already by a female wren or a mate was found in our absence.

In addition to the bluebirds, our neighbor’s yard also hosted other nesting birds this summer. A pair of White-breasted Nuthatches selected one of the three squirrel boxes in the yard for a nest site. We watched them gather nest material from the trees in the two yards. We did not see the young fledge but have seen young nuthatches around the yard, pursuing adults.

Last summer, American Robins built a nest on a beam under the neighbor’s patio roof. They successfully fledged young. This summer, a robin built a nest on the top of the grapevine wreath by the neighbor’s front door. It began to incubate eggs, but the



Squirrel box nest site for White-breasted Nuthatch. Photo by Marjorie Keatley.

neighbor found three eggs on the ground, broken, a couple of days later, and the nest was abandoned. I observed a robin soon after that gathering nest material but did not see where it went.

Though we haven't seen nests, we have regular visits from a pair of Eastern Towhees; have seen and heard behavior from Brown Thrashers that indicate they are likely nesting in the thickets above the yard; and have had regular visits from juvenile birds of several species. Within 15 minutes one evening in the last week of June, we observed four species of woodpeckers on the feeders. An adult and three young Northern Flickers came first to the feeders. The adult ate suet and then fed suet to one of the young birds. The flickers left and one of the two young Red-bellied Woodpeckers we have seen came to the suet feeder. It was joined by two Downy Woodpeckers; all flew when a Pileated Woodpecker came to the suet. On several occasions, an adult pileated visited the suet feeder, while a juvenile flew back and forth across the yard, calling and landing on the oak trees. The adult would fly to the young bird and feed it.

With the return of the House Finches and Downy Woodpeckers to the hummingbird feeder this summer (Keatley, 2014); the continual visits of the Pileated, Hairy, Downy, and Red-bellied Woodpeckers and the Northern Flicker to the large oak stump and suet; the large House Finch families at the sunflower feeders; the antics of the Gray Catbird that



American Robin nest on grapevine wreath. Photo by Marjorie Keatley.

“discovered” the soap dish feeder attached to our living room window and perched there eating peanuts or sat nearby running off the competition for two days; the Song Sparrow eating peanuts at the soap dish feeder; and the visits from the Brown Thrasher to the suet feeder; it has been fun watching the nesting and birding activity in these three yards.

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Field Notes Winter Season

December 1, 2014–February 28, 2015

Casey Rucker

Editor's Note: As of January 2015, the Northeast Regional Climate Center (NRCC) at Cornell University has ceased to issue climate summary reports for West Virginia. As a substitute, these and future field notes will make reference to monthly statewide precipitation and temperature averages for West Virginia provided by The Southeast Regional Climate Center (SRCC).

December was warmer than usual in West Virginia, according to the NRCC, and January was slightly colder than normal, but frigid weather gripped the state during February. January was 1.9 degrees below normal statewide, and February was 9.6 degrees below normal, according to the SRCC. December, January, and February were all drier than normal statewide.

These notes were gathered from the National Audubon Society sponsored West Virginia Bird Listserv, from Christmas Bird Count (CBC) results, and from field notes submitted to the editor by e-mail and regular mail. The full content of the submitted notes by the contributors of the WV Listserv may be viewed by visiting the archives at the following web site: <http://list.audubon.org/archives/wv-bird.html>, and the results of the Christmas Bird Counts may be found at <http://netapp.audubon.org/cbcobservation/>.

For the second winter in a row, the Great Lakes froze, and **waterfowl** and **seabirds** came south. Seven species of **gulls** appeared in our state, including **Iceland**, **Lesser Black-backed**, **Glaucous**, and **Great Black-backed**. Overall, it was a sparse winter for West Virginia bird diversity, with only 139 species reported in the state during the winter, from 38 of West Virginia's 55 counties.

Ducks, Swans, Geese—A wing-tagged **Trumpeter Swan**, known as L55, appeared in West Virginia during the second winter season in a row, near Ridgely, Mineral County, as reported by Terry Bronson on January 17, and as seen by Derek Courtney on January 27, when he also spotted two **Greater White-fronted Geese** in the same location. On December 6, Frederick Atwood found four **Greater White-fronted Geese**, along with a blue-morph **Snow Goose** and a continuing **Ross's Goose** at the Moorefield sewage ponds in Hardy County. James Farley and William Arnold saw three **Greater White-fronted Geese** in Harpers Ferry, Jefferson County, on January 1; and on February 19 Matthew Orsie saw a single **Greater White-fronted Goose** on the Shenandoah River in Jefferson County. Richard Esker discovered a single **Greater White-fronted Goose** at Civitan Park in Parkersburg, Wood County, on January 19, as reported by Jon Benedetti. On February 22, Gary Rankin saw a **Greater White-fronted Goose** at Sugarwood Golf Course, Wayne County, and six days later Jon Benedetti and Jerry

Westfall saw two **Greater White-fronted Geese** near the Belleville lock house in Wood County. **Snow Geese** made appearances in Hardy (FA), Mason (GR, WA, MG, DP), Mercer (JJP), Monongalia (DCo), Putnam (KK), and Wood Counties (JB). A continuing **Ross's Goose** in Moorefield, Hardy County, inspired reports in December from Jon and B.J. Little, Frederick Atwood, and the Moorefield Christmas Bird Count. On December 7, Davette Saeler discovered a **Ross's Goose** in Jane Lew, Lewis County, and the Kanawha-Charleston Christmas Bird Count on December 20 also included a **Ross's Goose**, as reported by Doren Burrell. **Cackling Geese** inspired reports from Mason (DP, MG, GR, WA), Monongalia (DCo, SO, CBC), Ohio (DCo, LeJ, TB), and Preston (DCo) Counties. Reports of **Canada Geese** were as usual widespread throughout the state. This season birders reported **Mute Swans** only in Monongalia County (JH, TB, DCo, ADy, HK). **Tundra Swans** were plentiful in West Virginia this winter. On December 3, Doug Wood counted 94 **Tundra Swans** at Ward Hollow Wildlife Habitat, Kanawha County.

Waterfowl numbers, while robust, were not quite as plentiful as last winter. The following species made appearances in at least 15 West Virginia counties: **American Black Ducks, Mallards, Canvasbacks, Redheads, Lesser Scaup, Buffleheads, Common Goldeneyes, Hooded, Common and Red-breasted Mergansers, and Ruddy Ducks**. Birders in at least six counties each found **Wood Ducks, Gadwalls, Northern Pintails, Green-winged Teal, Ring-necked Ducks, Greater Scaup, White-winged Scoters, and Long-tailed Ducks**. The following birds inspired reports from the counties listed: **American Wigeons** in Hardy (FA), Jefferson (JBz), and Summers (JP); **Northern Shovelers** in Hardy (FA), Jefferson (JBz), Mason (GR, MG, DP, WA), and Monongalia (TB, DCo); and **Surf Scoters** in Mason (MG, WA, GR, DP), Taylor (JH), and Wood (DJE, JB). On February 17, Ryan Tomazin saw hundreds of **ducks** near Pike Island Dam, Ohio County, including **Mallards, Canvasbacks, Greater Scaup, Lesser Scaup, Common Goldeneyes, Buffleheads, and Hooded, Common, and Red-breasted Mergansers**.

Grouse, Turkeys—There were reports of **Ruffed Grouse** from Hardy County (CBC), Monongalia County (DCo), Pocahontas County (CBC), Randolph County (CBC), and Tucker County (CBC). Birders found **Wild Turkeys** in many counties throughout the state, including many on the tallies of Christmas Bird Counts. On January 9 James Phillips saw 30 **Wild Turkeys** near the entrance to Pipestem State Park, Summers County.

Loons, Grebes—Derek Courtney saw a **Red-throated Loon** and 14 **Common Loons** on Cheat Lake, Monongalia County, on December 2. It was a fair winter for **Common Loons** in our state, with reports from Hardy (DH), Jefferson (BT), Marion (TB), Monongalia (DCo), Preston (DCo), Summers (JP), and Wood (CBC) Counties. It was also another good winter for reports of **Pied-billed and Horned Grebes** throughout the state. On December 7, Derek Courtney found 24 **Horned Grebes** in the vicinity of Cheat Lake, Monongalia County. In sharp contrast to last winter, there was only one sighting of **Red-necked Grebe**, by Wilma Jarrell in Proctor, Wetzel County, on January 30.

Cormorants, Herons, Egrets—Reports of **Double-crested Cormorants** came from Hardy (FA), Mason (DP, WA, MG, GR), Monongalia (DCo), Pleasants (GR, WA, DP), Putnam (CE, KK, DP, MG), and Summers Counties (CBC). **Great Blue Herons**

appeared throughout the state. James Farley spotted the only reported **Great Egret** of the season, on the Shenandoah River in Jefferson County on December 3.

Vultures—Reports of **Black Vultures** came from 14 counties, and **Turkey Vultures** were mentioned in reports from 15 counties. On January 29, John Snyder had to defend his domestic ducks from a **Black Vulture** looking for a little fresh meat in Persinger, Nicholas County.

Hawks, Eagles—**Bald Eagles** were reported from 25 counties this winter. On January 10, in their 10th annual Winter Eagle Survey, as reported by James Phillips, 31 volunteers found a record 56 **Bald Eagles** as well as two **Golden Eagles** at sites along the Bluestone and New Rivers, and on Indian Creek. Bruni Haydl watched a **Bald Eagle** turning an egg in its nest near her home in Charles Town, Jefferson County, on February 11. Diane Holsinger counted 53 **Bald Eagles** and one **Golden Eagle** on River Road near Moorefield, Hardy County, on February 24. **Northern Harriers, Sharp-shinned Hawks, Cooper's Hawks, Red-shouldered Hawks, Red-tailed Hawks, Rough-legged Hawks,** and **Golden Eagles** all appeared widely throughout West Virginia during the winter season. John Hall hosted an adult **Northern Goshawk** in his yard in Morgantown, Monongalia County, on February 13, as reported by Terry Bronson. Rodney Bartgis saw two **Golden Eagles** on and below Cheat Mountain, Randolph County, on January 25.

Rails, Coots—Matthew Orsie found a **Virginia Rail** at Altona Marsh, Jefferson County, on January 18. **American Coots** appeared in 11 counties this winter. On December 10, an **American Coot** was the 104th bird species to visit Hullet Good's property in Milliken, Kanawha County, in 2014.

Cranes—On January 22, Mike Peters saw a **Sandhill Crane** at Rehe Wildlife Management Area in Preston County, as reported by Susan Olcott.

Plovers—Perhaps due to the cold weather during the second half of the winter, there were reports of **Killdeer** from only nine counties.

Sandpipers—David Patick, Wendell Argabrite, and Michael Griffith discovered a **Least Sandpiper** at Robert C. Byrd Locks and Dam, Mason County, on December 20. It was the fourth winter record in the region. Birders in four West Virginia counties reported **Wilson's Snipes**: Jefferson (JL), Ohio (CBC), Pocahontas (CBC), and Tucker (CBC, SKi, CR). **American Woodcocks** showed up in different locations in Randolph County on February 11, as reported by Gretchen Nareff and Rodney Bartgis.

Gulls—It was a very good winter for **seabirds**. Derek Courtney estimated that he saw 3,000 to 3,500 **gulls** on a day's trip from Monongalia County to Ohio County on February 14. Pike Island Dam in Ohio County was the epicenter of **gull** sightings, mostly during the month of February, with **Iceland Gulls, Lesser Black-backed Gulls,** a **Glaucous Gull,** and **Great Black-backed Gulls** appearing in reports from Michael Dietrich, John Boback, Gary Rankin, Wendell Argabrite, Michael Griffith, David Patick, Ryan Tomazin, Albert Buckelew, Derek Courtney, LeJay Graffious, Matthew Orsie, Terry Bronson, Herb Myers, Joseph Hildreth, and Andy Weak. Terry Bronson reported on February 18 that Richard Gregg had found another **Glaucous Gull,** on the Kanawha

River south of Charleston in Kanawha County. Small numbers of **Bonaparte's Gulls** brightened reports from Hardy County (DC, DH, CBC), Monongalia County (DCo), Taylor County (JH), and Wood County (CBC). Birders reported **Ring-billed Gulls** and **Herring Gulls** in many West Virginia counties. In addition to the Ohio County sightings, **Great Black-backed Gulls** were also seen in Cabell (MG), Wetzell (WJ), and Wood (JB) Counties.

Pigeons, Doves—**Rock Pigeons** and **Mourning Doves** continue to reside throughout the state, as reported primarily in Christmas Bird Counts.

Owls—On January 22, Ross Brittain discovered a **Snowy Owl** near Bridgeport, in Taylor County, and the bird was very popular through January 25 (GN, JH, RBo, DCo, JD). Once again, our winter reports of **Barn Owls** came only from Moorefield, Hardy County (CBC, MO, DCo). Reports of **Eastern Screech-Owls** came from 12 counties, and **Great Horned Owls** inspired birders in six counties. On February 8, Gary Rankin heard two **Great Horned Owls** calling during the afternoon near his home in Lavalette, Wayne County. Birders in eight counties reported **Barred Owls**. The Moorefield Christmas Bird Count on December 30 reported the only **Short-eared Owl** of this season in West Virginia. December 20 was a good day for **Northern Saw-whet Owl** sightings. Ross Brittain and Joseph Hildreth found a **Northern Saw-whet Owl** at Cooper's Rock, Monongalia County, during the Morgantown CBC, which also logged an additional **Northern Saw-whet Owl**. The Pipestem CBC also recorded its first **Northern Saw-whet Owl**.

Hummingbirds—**Rufous Hummingbirds** threaten to become regular winter visitors to West Virginia. William Mills hosted a **Rufous Hummingbird** at his home in Charleston, Kanawha County, as he reported on December 8, as observed during the Charleston-Kanawha CBC on December 20, and as late as February 19. On December 13, Terry Bronson saw the **Rufous Hummingbird** that had been visiting Michael Slaven's feeders since the fall in Morgantown, Monongalia County, and the bird represented a new species for the Morgantown CBC on December 20.

Kingfishers—West Virginia birders reported **Belted Kingfishers** in 21 counties.

Woodpeckers—**Red-headed Woodpeckers**, **Red-bellied Woodpeckers**, **Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers**, **Downy** and **Hairy Woodpeckers**, **Northern Flickers**, and **Pileated Woodpeckers** were all subjects of widespread reports in West Virginia over the winter. Donald Good saw six **Red-headed Woodpeckers** in Amma, Roane County, on February 5. On December 28, Peter and Nannette McDonald watched a **Cooper's Hawk** attack a **Pileated Woodpecker** in their yard in Doddridge County.

Falcons—Many birders reported **American Kestrels** in most parts of the state. Birders spotted **Merlins** in Grant (FA), Harrison (JH), Jefferson (CBC), Kanawha (DB, CBC, SR), and Monongalia (TB, JBo, DCo) Counties. **Peregrine Falcon** reports came from Cabell (GR), Jefferson (JF, DHa), Kanawha (CBC), Mason (GR, MG, DP, WA), Monongalia (DCo), Ohio (PM, TB, DCo), and Wood Counties (JB, GR, WA, MG, DP). On February 24, Deborah Hale saw a pair of **Peregrine Falcons** in Harpers Ferry, Jefferson County.

Flycatchers—Reports of **Eastern Phoebe** came from 16 counties this winter.

Shrikes—On December 14, the Pocahontas County Christmas Bird Count included two **Loggerhead Shrikes**.

Crows, Jays, Ravens—**Blue Jays**, **American Crows**, and **Common Ravens** appeared in their usual haunts throughout the state. In addition to an expected report of **Fish Crows** from Jefferson County (CBC), Derek Courtney found a pair of **Fish Crows** near Ridgely, Mineral County, on January 27.

Larks—On December 9, Herb Myers found an unexpected pair of **Horned Larks** in Canaan Valley, Tucker County. Other reports of **Horned Larks** came from Grant (DCo), Hardy (FA, CBC), Jefferson (DHa, JBz, JL, BH, WS), Mason (DP, WA, MG, GR), and Raleigh Counties (CBC).

Chickadees, Titmice—**Carolina** and **Black-capped Chickadees** appeared in reports from their overlapping territories throughout West Virginia. **Tufted Titmice** occupied their usual spots in reports from throughout the state.

Nuthatches—**Red-breasted Nuthatches** appeared in reports from Berkeley (CBC), Hardy (KKi), Jefferson (CBC), Mason (GR, MG, DP, WA), Monongalia (RBr, CBC), Pendleton (CBC), and Tucker Counties (HMy, CBC). **White-breasted Nuthatches** were well-reported throughout the state.

Creepers—Birders in 20 West Virginia counties reported **Brown Creepers**.

Wrens—**House Wrens** appeared in Christmas Bird Counts in Pendleton and Pocahontas Counties during mid-December. West Virginia birders reported **Winter** and **Carolina Wrens** in good numbers statewide.

Kinglets—This winter **Golden-crowned Kinglets** were familiar sights in most parts of the state, while **Ruby-crowned Kinglets** appeared only in Berkeley (CBC), Hampshire (CBC), Jefferson (DHa, JBz), Kanawha (HG), Putnam (CE), and Wood (CBC) Counties. Jeffery Del Col saw five **Golden-crowned Kinglets**, his first of the year, on February 8 in Philippi, Barbour County.

Thrushes—**Eastern Bluebirds**, **Hermit Thrushes**, and **American Robins** appeared in good numbers in our state this winter, mostly in lower elevations.

Mockingbirds, Thrashers—**Gray Catbirds** inspired reports in Jefferson (BH), Monongalia (CBC), Pocahontas (SK), and Preston Counties (TB, DD); and **Brown Thrashers** appeared in Jefferson (WS), McDowell (CBC), Monongalia (JBo), and Wayne (GR, DP) Counties. West Virginians reported **Northern Mockingbirds** widely over the winter season.

Starlings—**European Starlings** continued their widespread occupation of habitats throughout our state.

Pipits—On January 8, Michael Griffith spotted 100 **American Pipits** near Route 35 in Mason County. Overall, **American Pipits** made appearances in seven counties: Berkeley (CBC), Grant (FA), Jefferson (DHa), Mason (MG, GR, WA, DP), Monongalia (CBC), Summers (JP), and Wetzel (WJ).

Waxwings—**Cedar Waxwings** were well-represented in birders' reports this winter, with sightings in 13 counties. Mimi Kibler saw approximately 30 **Cedar Waxwings** in

Parsons, Tucker County, on January 25.

Warblers—**Common Yellowthroats** made surprise appearances in the Ohio and Raleigh County Christmas Bird Counts, and birders in lower elevations saw Myrtle-race **Yellow-rumped Warblers** at locations throughout the state.

Towhees, Sparrows, Juncos—There were no unusual **sparrows** reported in West Virginia this winter. **Eastern Towhees** made their usual appearances at lower elevations in many parts of the state. In addition, **American Tree, Field, Fox, Song, Swamp, White-throated,** and **White-crowned Sparrows**, as well as **Dark-eyed Juncos**, appeared widely. **Chipping Sparrows** inspired birders' reports in Hampshire (CBC), Jefferson (CBC, JBz), Mason (GR, MG, DP, WA), Pocahontas (CBC), Tucker (CBC), Wayne (GR), and Wood (CBC) Counties, while **Savannah Sparrows** appeared in reports only from Jefferson (DH, JBz, MO) and Mason (DP, WA, MG, GR) Counties. On January 11, Joette Borzik found more than 40 **White-crowned Sparrows** on Country Club Road, Jefferson County.

Cardinals—Birders throughout the state reported **Northern Cardinals** in good numbers. Gary Rankin hosted more than 40 **Northern Cardinals** at his feeders in La-valette, Wayne County, on a snowy February 16.



The Kirtland's Warbler reported by LeJay Graffious at the Allegheny Front Migration Observatory on September 30, 2014. See Rucker, C. (2015). Field Notes, Fall Season, The Redstart, 82(2), 50. Photo by William Beatty.

Blackbirds, Allies—Gary Rankin discovered at least 50 **Brewer’s Blackbirds** near Point Pleasant, Mason County, on January 18. Reports of **Red-winged Blackbirds** and **Common Grackles** came from areas all over the state. Reports were scarcer for **Eastern Meadowlarks** (five counties), **Rusty Blackbirds** (four counties), and **Brown-headed Cowbirds** (six counties).

Finches, Allies—Feeders in most parts of the state hosted **House Finches**, **Purple Finches**, **Pine Siskins**, and **American Goldfinches**. Donald Good hosted 100 to 125 **Pine Siskins** at his feeders in Mill Creek, Roane County, for the entire month of January. Rodney Bartgis, Bob Dean, and Stan Corwin-Roach saw the only **Red Crossbill** reported this season, on January 20 near Seneca Rocks, Pendleton County. The state’s only reported **Common Redpoll** was an off-and-on visitor to David Carr’s bird feeders in Arkansasaw, Hardy County, beginning on January 17 and continuing through February 1.

Weaver Finches—The **House Sparrow** continues throughout the state, primarily in urban settings.

Contributors to the Winter Field Notes: Wendell Argabrite (WA), Frederick Atwood (FA), Jon Benedetti (JB), John Boback (JBo), Randy Bodkins (RBo), Joette Borzik (JBz), Ross Brittain (RBr), Terry Bronson (TB), Doren Burrell (DB), David Carr (DC), Derek Courtney (DCo), David Daniels (DD), Jeffery Del Col (JD), Amanda Dymacek (ADy), Cynthia Ellis (CE), Richard and Jeannette Esker (DJE), James Farley (JF), Hullet Good (HG), LeJay Graffious (LeJ), Michael Griffith (MG), Deborah Hale (DHa), Bruni Haydl (BH), Joseph Hildreth (JH), Diane Holsinger (DH), Wilma Jarrell (WJ), Kim Kazmierski (KK), Sharon Kearns (SK), Stephen Kimbrell (SKi), Kathy King (KKi), Hillar Klandorf (HK), Jon and B.J. Little (JL), Paul McKay (PM), Herb Myers (HMy), Gretchen Nareff (GN), Susan Olcott (SO), Matthew Orsie (MO), David Patick (DP), James Phillips (JP), James and Judy Phillips (JJP), Gary Rankin (GR), Steven Richards (SK), Casey Rucker (CR), N. Wade Snyder (WS), and Bill Telfair (BT).

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2015 Calendar of Events

The Brooks Bird Club, Inc.

Date	Activity	Place
January	BBC Membership Month	Wheeling, WV
February	Write an article for the Mail Bag or The Redstart	mail to editors
February 4-6	Trip to Killdeer Plains (Contact Gene Hilton)	
March 6-8	Early Spring Meeting (Contact Dick Esker).....	North Bend State Park
March 14	Waterfowl Field Trip (day trip) (Contact Carl Slater)	Seneca Lake, OH
April 25	Three Rivers Bird Club (day trip) (Contact Ryan Tomazin)	
	.....	Raccoon Creek State Park, PA
May 9	International Migratory Bird Day, N. American Migration Count	
	.....	local chapters
May 7-10	Wildflower Pilgrimage, Blackwater Falls State Park	Davis, WV
May 29-June 3	Thorn Springs 4-H Camps (contact Dawn Fox)	Pendleton County
June 5-13	Foray - Camp Galilee (contact Janice Emrick or Ryan Tomazin)	
	.....	Terra Alta, WV
August 15-Oct. 3	Bird Banding.....	Dolly Sods, WV
October 16	Board of Trustees Meeting, Bethany College (Contact Carl Slater)	
	.....	Bethany, WV
October 16-18	BBC Reunion/Annual Meeting, Bethany College (Contact A. Buckelew).....	
	.....	Bethany, WV
November 11-15	Eastern Shore (Contact Carl Slater)	
Dec. 14-Jan. 5, '16	Christmas Bird Counts	local groups

BBC FORAYS (dates and places tentative)

2015	Camp Galilee, Preston County	Terra Alta, WV
2016	Camp Kidd, Tucker County	Parsons, WV

SEASONAL FIELD NOTES DUE

Winter: March 15	Spring: June 15	Summer: September 15	Fall: December 15
MAIL TO: Casey Rucker, P.O. Box 2, Seneca Rocks, WV 26884		autoblock@frontiernet.net	

ARTICLES FOR THE MAIL BAG DUE

February 15	May 15	August 15	November 15
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<http://brooksbirdclub.org>

The dates for the 2015 BBC program may be changed if necessary. Changes will be announced on the Web page or in The Mail Bag.

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