

The Roanoke Valley Bird Club

Next Meeting:
February 10, 7:00 pm
Grandin Court Baptist
Church

Celebrating
57 Years of Birding
1957-2014



www.roanokevalleybirdclub.com

RVBC NEWSLETTER

February 2014

SNOWY OWL



Norma Mcleod of Yulee, Florida, took this photo on the north end of the beach side of Little Talbot Island near Jacksonville, Florida on January 9, around 3 p.m. Although Norma is a Florida native she summers in Independence, Virginia and is a member of the Blue Ridge Birders.

Cover Story on page 8

**MESSAGE FROM YOUR PRESIDENT
KENT DAVIS**

Dear Roanoke Valley Bird Club Members,



Snowy Owls have made an invasion along the Eastern Seaboard with reports coming in from Maine to North Carolina. Snowy Owls are usually found north of the Arctic Circle and sometimes come down into our northern states. Most of the sightings are of immature birds. There were four reported in Chincoteague, Virginia on the same day and even one reported in Bermuda! The Snowy found in Jacksonville, Florida is pictured on our cover with the white sandy beach looking a lot like snow.

If you have not seen a Snowy and want to see one in Virginia, now is the time. This year's irruption is the largest in the last 100 years.

On Jan. 18, 2014, **Mike Smith** and I went to Mt. Crawford, Virginia and saw the one behind the White Wave plant. There are two Snowy Owls being reported from that area. If you go to ebird.org you can find more information on sightings of the Snowy Owls. If you go to see a Snowy Owl, please submit your sightings to eBird and please treat these birds with respect, and don't approach too close.

On another note I want to encourage you to join us on the annual Raptor Count which will be held on Saturday, Feb. 15, 2014. As Anne says, "This is a great excuse to get out of the house and so some winter birding." Please contact Anne Tucker at (540) 721-1573 if you have any questions.

Thanks and good birding,



kedjr@cox.net
540-344-8377

Next Meeting:

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 7:00 PM

Grandin Court Baptist Church

Featured Program:

**"Climate Change and Its Likely Effects on
Virginia's Flora and Fauna"**

February's program will be presented by Chris Burkett. Chris is the Wildlife Action Plan Coordinator for the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries. Chris will present a program showing the changes Virginia's wildlife and flora face in the future due to climate change. He will talk about how organisms change their habits to adapt to changing temperatures and weather. Birds and their adaptations will be discussed in his presentation.

With many thanks, the meeting refreshments will be provided by
Barbara Bricks and Sandy Stinnett

*Please join us for dinner before the meeting
Brambleton Deli, 3655 Brambleton Road, 5:30 pm*

The previous program during the January Meeting featured "The Red Knot" by Sarah Karpanty of the Department of Fish and Wildlife & Conservation at VPI&SU.

**The Roanoke Valley
Bird Club**

Roanoke, Virginia



**2014
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CONTACT US!

The RVBC Newsletter is published monthly from September through May with the deadline for each issue on the **20th of the month** prior to publication. Photos and articles are gladly accepted for publication as room allows and may be sent electronically, but if original photos are mailed please include a SASE for photo return.

Thank you!

Carol Whiteside

6487 Shingle Ridge Road • Roanoke, VA 24018
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Sightings

1/2/14 **Kent Davis** and **Mike Smith** birded Swoope Area, Augusta, VA sighting 29 species which included 150 Horned Lark, 123 Brown-headed Cowbird, and 1 Brewers Blackbird.

1/24/14 **Nancy Young** reported a Pine Siskin at her feeder, a first in quite a while.

Mary Lou Barritt reports both Yellow-Crowned Kinglets and Ruby-crowned Kinglets appearing at her feeders this month and sent the photo to the right.



January 13 Membership Meeting Reported Sightings

- ✓ **Bob Luce** saw a bald eagle at his feeder at the lake.
- ✓ **Maureen Eiger** saw a brown-headed nuthatch at her feeder in Roanoke City
- ✓ **Mary Lou Barritt** saw a ruby-crowned kinglet in her yard.
- ✓ **Rupert Cutler** saw a ring-billed gull on the Lick Run Greenway.
- ✓ **Sid Barritt** saw purple swamphens in Florida.
- ✓ Another attendee saw a cooper's hawk in a neighbor's yard catching a blue jay.

Field Trips

1/12/14 8:30am-12:30pm – **Wes Teets** led a field trip to Botetourt County with **Kent Davis, Eunice Hudgins, Beth Griffin, David Brunstetter** and one member of the Lynchburg Bird Club sighting 39 species that included: 1 Red-shouldered Hawk, 1 Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, 1 Winter Wren, 4 Golden-crowned Kinglet, 2 Yellow-rumped Warbler (Myrtle), and 6 Field Sparrow.



1/18/14 8:00 -10:00 am – **Bill Hunley** led a field trip to the Tinker Creek Greenway with (left-right) **David Brunstetter, Mary Lou Barritt, Liz Williams, Bill Hunley, Mike Donahue, and Gary Brunk. Rupert Cutler** (right) attended and was the photographer. They viewed 28 species high-lighted by Brown Creeper, Winter Wren, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, and Yellow-Bellied Sapsucker. They traveled two miles with the temperature around 23 degrees.



1/25/14 **Linda Cory** led a field trip to Murray's Pond, Carvin's Cove, Greenfield and Botetourt County with **Kent Davis, Mike Smith, Eunice Hudgins, Liz Williams, Mary Lou & Sid Barritt, David Brunstetter and Laura Beltran**. Sightings included: Common Merganser, Horned Grebe, Bald Eagle, American Black Duck, Northern Pintail, Canvasback, Redhead, American Pipit Yellow-rumped Warbler. Mute Swan. Black Swan. American Kestrel. Winter Wren.

Kent's Bird of the Month

RUSTY BLACKBIRD

Euphagus carolinus

From **Barry Kinzie's Birds and Birding the Roanoke Valley**

Status: Very uncommon spring and fall transient and fairly rare winter visitor (October 20 – April 20)

Preface: The size of flocks of "rusties" is smaller than they were 25 or more years ago. Most sources seem to think that numbers are declining; hence the "**Rusty Blackbird Blitz**," a mid-winter count. [The Rusty Blackbird Blitz is held during the month of March in Virginia.]



Rusty Blackbird is one of North America's most rapidly declining species. The population has plunged an estimated 85-99 percent over the past forty years and scientists are completely puzzled as to what is the cause. They are relatively uncommon denizens of wooded swamps, breeding in the boreal forest and wintering in the eastern U.S. In winter, they travel in small flocks and are identified by their distinctive rusty featheredges and pallid yellow eyes.

Rusty Blackbird is a medium-sized blackbird with a slender bill and medium-length tail. The bill is slightly decurved. They are a bit larger and longer-tailed than Red-winged Blackbird with a more slender bill. Rusty Blackbird is thinner-billed and shorter-tailed than Common Grackle.

In winter, male Rusty Blackbirds are recognized by their rusty feather edges, pale yellow eye and buffy eyebrow. Females are gray-brown; they also have rusty feather edges, pale eyes and a bold eyebrow, contrasting with darker feathers right around the eye. Breeding males are dark glossy black.

Rusty Blackbirds often gather in small flocks in winter, sometimes mix with Common Grackles, Red-winged Blackbirds and European Starlings. They feed on the ground by walking and flipping over leaves and debris. They tend to hold their long tail up when feeding on the ground, which can help pick them out in a flock of Red-winged Blackbirds. Flocks often perch at the tops of trees. Rusty Blackbirds frequently give a distinctive bubbly call, kurlul-teEE, often ending on a high-pitched rising note.

Look for Rusty Blackbirds in wet areas, including flooded woods, swamps, marshes and the edges of ponds. These moist habitats are their favorite foraging areas in winter and during migration. During the breeding season, they favor bogs, beaver ponds and wet woods in boreal forest.

From the **Cornell Lab of Ornithology**

Meet a Member

MIKE DONAHUE

RVBC LIFETIME MEMBER



As best I can recall, I joined the Roanoke Valley Bird Club around 1978-79-80. At that time, I was attending several local natural history meetings, including the Roanoke Rock and Gem Society, Blue Ridge Herpetological Society, Native Plant Society and the Roanoke Archeology Society. I remember attending my first RVBC meetings at the old Science Museum building at Mason's Mill School while **George Stubbs** was the RVBC President. I recall a number of birders from that time, **Colonel John Eddy, Earnest and Hazel Moore, Sam and Dora Lee Ellington, Horace Hood, Woody Middleton, Peggy Spiegel, Jim Ayers, Bill Opengari, and Barry Kinzie** who welcomed me into the world of birding. One individual from that time has become a life-long close friend, **Bill Hunley**, who I met on my first bird club field trip, birding the ponds and fields of Botetourt County. From that field trip, Bill and I have spent considerable amount of time in the field looking for "all things natural."



Mike and Bill on a recent RVBC field trip.
Photo by Rupert Cutler

My involvement with the RVBC has included Field Trip Leader, Field Trip Chairman, Christmas Bird Count Compiler, unofficial bird record keeper for the Sewage Treatment Plant and RVBC President. My involvement with the RVBC has been, and continues to be, very rewarding.

Typical of many birders, all during my childhood, I was intrigued with all things in the natural history realm and would spend most of my time outside, following my curiosity. Little has changed in that regard; I still spend a great deal of time outside searching for birds, bugs, critters and plants.

I currently work for the US Forest Service, as a Biological Science Technician, on the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests. In this position, I perform a host of duties that allow me to capitalize on my knowledge of the world of natural history of our area, including identifying birds, plants, butterflies, insects, reptiles, amphibians and rare natural communities. In this position, I conduct field surveys for a number of projects across the 1.8 million acres of the GWNF and occasionally, on other National Forests.

From those early birding years that started at the old Science Museum, I have met a number of wonderful individuals. In addition to those I listed above, I have been fortunate to have met and birded with **Bill Akers, Jerry Via, John and Eunice Hudgins, Mike Smith, Mike Purdy, Tad Finnell, Kent and Kathy Summers, Dr. Perry Kendig, Myriam Moore, Sally Nelson** and a host of others.

WINTER WOODPECKER CENSUS REACHES MODERN HIGH

By Michael Wilson

Center for Conservation Biology, College of William and Mary & Virginia Commonwealth University

Center for Conservation Biology biologists finished 2013 with more good news for the Piney Grove Red-cockaded Woodpeckers as the annual winter survey of the population yielded another record high of 58 birds. The survey sets a new high watermark in the recovery of the species in Virginia. The population reached a record low in the Commonwealth in the year 2000 when only 2 breeding groups remained following decades of decline from habitat loss. It was at that time that The Nature Conservancy purchased the tract of land known as the Piney Grove Preserve with the primary objective of restoring the federally endangered woodpecker in Virginia to pre-decline levels. Over the past several years we have witnessed a sudden increase in the number of breeding groups and individuals within the preserve.

The 58 birds detected this winter were composed of 43 adult birds and 15 young-of-the-year distributed into 12 groups. Red-cockaded Woodpeckers are cooperative breeders so the term group describes a potentially breeding adult male and female that are joined by additional helper birds. The group remains together throughout the year and throughout daily activities such as foraging. The population still retains 15 of 21 birds fledged this past summer. This retention rate is about average compared to previous years.

The most surprising finding this winter was the formation of two new groups. In general, group formation is less stable in winter than in summer so it is possible the 2 new groups could dissolve before the breeding season begins. However, one of the groups represents the first ever pioneering event at Piney Grove. Since 2000, the growth of the Red-cockaded Woodpecker population has been facilitated by the installation of artificial nesting trees and translocation of birds from South Carolina to Virginia. Over time, the Virginia birds began to move into unoccupied clusters of artificial cavities and then eventually augment those sites with their own naturally excavated cavities. However, the newly pioneered site is the result of a Virginia bird excavating its own roosting cavity without artificial facilitation and in an entirely new location on the preserve that is away from other woodpecker groups. Another new group has formed within a set of artificial cavity trees that has undergone a short-term colonization by birds a few years ago then vanished as a group site.

We will continue annual monitoring of the Virginia Red-cockaded Woodpecker population with another census in spring followed by breeding season observations to document productivity. The winter survey is made possible with funding from the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries and other year-round monitoring from funds provided by The Nature Conservancy and The Center for Conservation Biology.



Calendar of Events

Linda Cory, Field Trip Chairman, 580-5214

Please do not call any of the trip leaders after 8pm the night before the field trip,
in consideration of having to get up early the next day to lead the field trip.

Please remember to share the cost of gas when you carpool.

Thank you!



FEBRUARY

- 10 **RVBC MEETING, 7:00 PM "Climate Change and Its Likely Effects on Virginia's Flora and Fauna"** presented by Chris Burkett. Chris is the Wildlife Action Plan Coordinator for the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries.
- 12 **Second Wednesday Midweek Walk - Greenfield Lake, 8:30 am.** Please join naturalist **Laura Beltran (706-220-0980)** for a walk around Greenfield Lake in Botetourt County. We will search for waterfowl and songbirds. Mostly flat walking for about 1 1/2 miles. Meet at the second dirt parking lot (off of International Parkway) on the right across the road from the lake.
- 15 **The Annual Raptor Count:** Plan to spend a few hours driving away the winter blues on Saturday February 15, 2014. The annual Raptor Count is a great excuse to get out of the house and do some winter birding with your birding buddies!! No skill is required, just a little time and effort. Plan on a leisurely drive around your area, counting all the hawks you see. Points are awarded for each hawk, although this is not a serious competition. The winner gets bragging rights!! We compile the results from everyone's efforts and keep an eye on trends in hawk populations. In the unlikely event of inclement weather, an alternate date of Sunday, February 16, has been set. Contact Anne Tucker (540) 721-1573 if you have any questions. The tally sheet (on page 6) can be emailed to billt3256@gmail.com or mailed to 3256 Lakewood Forest Rd. Moneta VA 24121.
- 23 **Sunday Field Trip - STP and More!** Join **Linda Cory** at 8AM at the Lower Level Towers Parking on next to Sun Trust Bank. We will caravan to the Roanoke Sewage Treatment Plant first. The reason this walk is on Sunday, is that is the only day that construction will not be taking place at the facility. Entrance to the STP is by special permit only and we must enter as a group. Please **RSVP to Linda at 580-5214** before 9PM on 2/20/14 so we can give a head count to the STP office. After the STP, we will bird at the end of Rutrough Road on the Roanoke River. We may also bird Smith Park on Wiley Drive if time permits.

HOW BIRDS COPE WITH COLD IN WINTER

By Daisy Yuhas

From feathers to fat, birds have multiple strategies for keeping warm when the mercury dips.

Each autumn as many birds begin epic journeys to warmer climates, there are always some species that stay put for the winter. These winter birds have a better chance of maintaining their territory year-round, and they avoid the hazards of migration. But in exchange they have to endure the cold.

Like us, birds are warm blooded, which means their bodies maintain a constant temperature, often around 106 degrees Fahrenheit. To make enough heat, and maintain it, they've evolved many different strategies--some similar to our own.

Sparrows, for example, seek out shelter in dense foliage or cavities to avoid the elements. They also huddle, bunching together to share warmth, and try to minimize their total surface area by tucking in their head and feet and sticking up their feathers. Cardinals, impossible to miss against the snow, and other smaller birds puff up into the shape of a little round beach ball to minimize heat loss.

"Big birds, like geese and grouse, do what we do," says physiologist David Swanson at the University of South Dakota. "They put on insulation." Their insulation often involves growing an extra set of insulating downy feathers.

Birds can also put on fat as both an insulator and energy source: More than 10 percent of winter body weight may be fat in certain species, including chickadees and finches. As a result, some birds spend the vast majority of their daylight hours seeking fatty food sources, making feeder food even more precious for surviving a frosty night.

When asked which birds are toughest winter survivors, Swanson points to little ones like chickadees. These small creatures can't put on too much bulk for aerodynamic reasons. Instead, explains Swanson, they are experts in shivering. This isn't the familiar tremble that mammals use to generate heat. Birds shiver by activating opposing

muscle groups, creating muscle contractions without all of the jiggling typical when humans shiver. This form of shaking is better at retaining the bird's heat.

Another adaptation shared by many species is the ability to keep warm blood circulating near vital organs while allowing extremities to cool down. Take gulls. They can stand on ice with feet at near-freezing temperatures while keeping their body's core nice and toasty.

Keeping warm when the sun is up is one thing, but few winter challenges are more daunting than nightfall, when temperatures drop and birds must rely on every adaptation they have to survive their sleep. Some birds save energy by allowing their internal thermostat to drop. Hummingbirds are a famous example of this, undergoing torpor nightly as their body temperature drops close to outside temperatures. But torpor is not too common in winter birds, because the morning warm up would take too much extra energy. Instead, black-capped chickadees and other species undergo a more moderate version of this, reducing their body temperature as much as 22 degrees Fahrenheit from their daytime level in a process called regulated hypothermia.

One simple way to help birds when the weather outside is frightful is to hang feeders. To attract a diversity of birds, select different feeder designs and a variety of foods. A tube feeder filled with black oil sunflower or mixed seeds, for example, will attract chickadees and finches. Woodpeckers devour suet feeders. And a safflower or sunflower-filled hopper feeder entices the usual visitors plus larger birds like cardinals and red-winged blackbirds. (Check out the Audubon Guide to Winter Bird-Feeding for tips.) The birds benefit from the backyard buffet, and you'll have a front-row seat to numerous species flocking to your plants and feeders.

WINTER RAPTOR COUNT

February 15, 2014

Participants _____

Date _____ Time started _____ Time completed _____

Location _____

<u>SPECIES</u>	<u>POINTS</u>	<u>NUMBER</u>	<u>NOTES</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
TURKEY VULTURE	1*			
BLACK VUTURE	2*			
RED-TAILED HAWK	5			
AMERICAN KESTREL	10			
SCREECH OWL	10**			
RAVEN	10			
COOPER'S HAWK	20			
SHARP-SHINNED HAWK	20			
LOGGERHEAD SHRIKE	50			
RED-SHOULDERED HAWK	30			
GREAT HORNED OWL	30			
BARRED OWL	35			
BARN OWL	50			
NORTHERN HARRIER	40			
SHORT-EARED OWL	75			
ROUGH-LEGGED HAWK	75			
GOLDEN EAGLE	100			
BALD EAGLE	50			
PEREGRINE FALCON	75			
MERLIN	75			
GOSHAWK	100			
LONG-EARED OWL	125			
SAW-WHET OWL	125			
NORTHERN SHRIKE	150			
UNIDENTIFIED RAPTOR	5			

POINT TOTAL _____

* Maximum {50 Points} However, keep your totals. There is a 10 point bonus on peak counts for these three species.
 **Maximum {100 Points}

RULES: Teams may bird any area within 100 mile radius of Woodpecker Ridge. Birds must be seen or heard by at least 50%(minimum of 2) of team members. Count period not to exceed twelve hours.

Who Gives the Hoot!



WHAT TO DO WITH DISCARDED CHRISTMAS TREES?

There are a couple of options for trees after they have outlived their usefulness as Christmas trees. One is to take them to a recycling drop off site where they are collected and ground into mulch. Many solid waste authorities offer this service. For birders, and particularly those who feed birds, there is another option. They can create additional cover around their bird feeders. A problem can arise when the cover around a feeder is made up of deciduous trees or shrubs. In the winter they offer little cover to birds feeding at the feeder or on the ground. This makes them vulnerable to the hawks who make their living hanging around bird feeders, hoping they get lucky. Discarded Christmas trees can fix that problem. Propped up close to the feeder or on the ground alongside the feeder area, they offer protection should a hawk show.

TO ALL RUSTY BLACKBIRD ENTHUSIASTS (AREN'T WE ALL):

The International Rusty Blackbird Working Group (IRBWG) has launched a Spring Migration Blitz website today to coordinate the blitz. For those of us in Virginia the blitz is currently scheduled to take place in March 2014. The group will continue to develop and expand the site with the next release of information. So take a look at the current site: <http://rustyblackbird.org/outreach/migration-blitz/>. I think you'll be excited by what is planned. If you're interested in participating or have a question, send me an email and I'll try to provide an answer and keep you updated as the spring approaches. Until then, go out and look for the Rusties currently migrating through Virginia. Maybe some of them will winter near you.

Bob Ake

Rusty Blackbird Spring 2014 Migration Blitz State Coordinator

Welcome New Members!



Michael Hartley, Roanoke
Bill Modica, Salem

FUN STATISTICS FROM 2013'S GREAT BACKYARD BIRD COUNT

The Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) takes place each February over a 4 day period, right before birds begin migrating north. Since citizens contribute data, and not just scientists, a much greater area and amount of data can be collected. Of course the downside is that the data must be reviewed carefully for reliability. Therefore, the organizers of the count - Cornell Lab of Ornithology, the National Audubon Society, and Bird Studies Canada - carefully review reports of unusual species or unusual numbers of a certain species.

The December 2013 edition of National Geographic magazine gave the following statistics for the 2013 GBBC. 3,610 species were reported, from 134,935 lists which covered 110 countries (120,500 lists were from the United States). The most widespread species was the house sparrow, found in 43 countries. The mallard, Canada goose, and rock pigeon were found in every U.S. state. The Northern cardinal was sighted the most, on 46,515 lists and the spectacled finch was observed the least, on 1 list. The red-breasted nuthatch, white-winged crossbill, red-winged crossbill, hoary redpoll, and common redpoll were some species that increased noticeably from the 2012 count. And the largest flock of birds reported in 2013? The red-winged blackbird, with about 5 million observed in Missouri.

Laura Beltran

WATER DRIP A MAGNET FOR YARD BIRDS

Yard plantings are a very effective way to attract birds since they provide cover and food; birdseed can also be useful in moderation. For example our prized painted bunting is fond of white millet presented in a "jail bird" feeder where the seeds are surrounded by a wire mesh big enough for small birds to pass, but too small for large birds to enter. This keeps seed hogs such as grackles away from the feeder.

But providing a source of fresh water, especially a dripping water bath, is often the best way to attract birds to your backyard. In Florida we live on an island (Manasota Key) which has no surface fresh water other than occasional rain and morning dew; thus most yard birds need fresh drinking water. Since we installed two dripping water baths we regularly see birds coming to drink and also to bathe. The provision of fresh water is important because most typical passerine or perching birds do not have a salt gland (as do marine birds) or their kidneys are not able to concentrate their urine enough to derive free water from drinking sea water.



Bill Dunson photo

The dripping feeder allows birds two options. First many choose to drink directly from the drip. They may also decide to drink or take a bath in the bowl below. On a recent day we had a male painted bunting [left] drinking at the drip, followed by a trio of beautiful warblers, the yellow-rumped, yellow-throated, and pine warbler all taking a bath. The pine warbler enjoyed a thorough soaking. Other birds came also, a male cardinal, a female red bellied woodpecker, and some common grackles. There were also a flock of goldfinches, palm warblers, a blue gray gnatcatcher, a blue headed vireo and a catbird.

You can purchase the equipment to set up a dripping water bath on line or at a birding outlet. Properly regulated the drip uses very little water and will provide a huge amount of pleasure in watching birds drinking and bathing at close range.

Bill Dunson, Englewood, FL, and Galax, VA
Email: wdunson@comcast.net

<http://www.galaxgazette.com/blogs> and http://lemonbayconservancy.org/dunson_archives.htm

GOT SNOWIES— 2013-14!

eBird

Both photos taken in
Rockingham County
Mt. Crawford, Virginia



Paul Klockenbrinks photo



Stan Bentley photo

Two years ago Snowy Owls staged a massive invasion into the Lower 48, and this year it looks like they are on the move again. In 2011 the invasion was continent-wide, with particularly large numbers in the Pacific Northwest and Great Plains, but numbers in the Northeast U.S. and Atlantic coast not particularly high. This year's invasion looks quite different, with the center of focus (so far) being the Great Lakes and Northeast. Keep an eye out for these northern owls in open areas while you're birding, and don't overlook that white bump in the dunes, or on the peak of the house next door—it just might be a Snowy Owl. eBird is poised to track this invasion and compare it with previous ones, so please make sure to enter all sightings, and suggest that your birding friends do the same!

The map below left shows the current (as of 3 December) point map for Nov-Dec 2013. Note how the invasion is restricted to the Great Lakes and the Northeast, but also with birds already reaching North Carolina and Bermuda! Some intrepid birders have racked up impressive totals, such as 12 along the New Hampshire coast 30 November or 8 around Boston on 3 December.

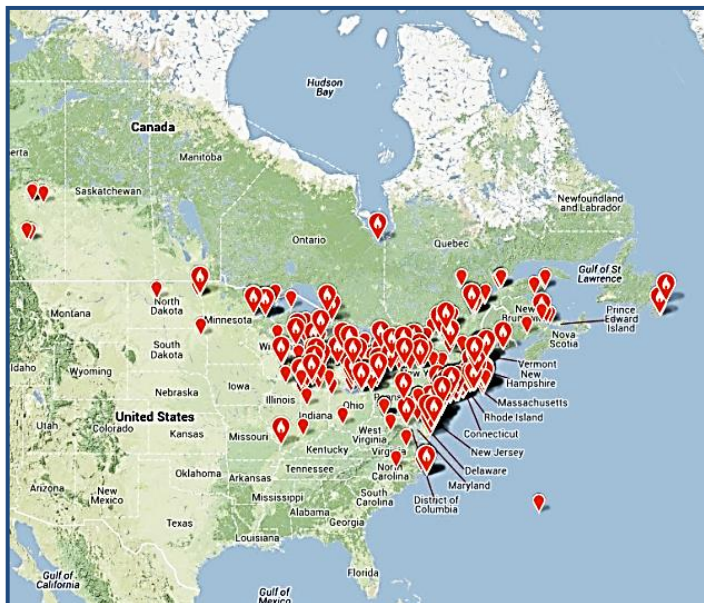
Snowy Owls breed widely across the Arctic and move widely in search of resources suitable for breeding. These invasions tend to be driven by very good summer resources (lemmings primarily - see below right photo) in

certain regions of the Arctic that lead to high breeding success. Many of the owls that move south are hatch-year birds (indicative of the high breeding success).

Even at this early stage, one might hypothesize that this year's invasion originates from Snowy Owls in the eastern Arctic or Greenland, while the 2011-2012 one may have originated from the central or western Arctic. Making these direct connections is always difficult, but often patterns seen in eBird can lend insight into how birds are moving and where they may have originated. It'll be interesting to see what happens as the winter progresses. Will the Snowy Owl movement continue? Will it gain strength in the West? Will other owl species move as well?

The eBird signal for the 2011 invasion was helped along by a couple individuals who helped compile records from people who saw Snowy Owls but did not use eBird. We would welcome similar efforts this year. In 2011 a proxy eBird account was established to collect Snowy Owl records, taking care to submit as Incidental observations and incomplete checklists, while at the same time plotting the birds accurately and giving observer attribution in the species comments.

Below right: Snowy Owl nest lined with lemmings



Birders Use Smartphones to Play Bird Songs

Birders Squawk About Increased Use of Apps to Lure Birds Into View

By Sarah Portlock

As Christopher Vogel approached a hot spot for Louisiana waterthrushes in a New Jersey state forest one spring day, the professional ornithologist could hear the bird's complex crescendo of "CHEE-CHEE-CHEE-titi-WEE." But something didn't seem quite right.

Then he spotted the trouble. The warble wasn't coming from a bird. Rather, he said, a large man in full birding regalia—khaki field vest, floppy sun hat and expensive binoculars—was standing there on a bridge, his iPhone chirping away. It was loudly playing the bird's song, seemingly on a loop, in an effort to lure the bird into view.

"He thought he was alone. He was being on the sly," recalled Mr. Vogel, 41 years old. "And then somebody caught him." "I told him, 'You know that's exactly what you're not supposed to be doing.'" Mr. Vogel then snapped a photo of the man and threatened to post it online for public shaming. The birder blanched, said nothing, went back to his car and left.

An otherwise peaceful pastime has been roiled by conflict as digital field guides, and the song recordings they include, have made birding easily accessible for anyone with a smartphone and, sometimes, a portable speaker. In a hobby where reward has come from years of quietly, patiently waiting outdoors and diligently studying technical tomes, there is deep resentment of birders who are relying on these easy-to-use—or abuse—apps.

The dispute has sparked spats in the field and email wars in the birding community. The American Birding Association, a group that caters to recreational birders, is considering a major revision to its oft-cited Code of Birding Ethics to address smartphone use. It currently suggests birders "limit the use of recordings" to attract birds and never use the methods on rare birds or at popular sites. One proposal is to "discourage" their use and turn to playback only for research purposes.

"With an iPod or a smartphone, anybody can play and play and play and play anything they want," said Geoffrey LeBaron, director of the National Audubon Society's annual Christmas Bird Count, an avian census, now in its 114th year, that runs through Jan. 5. "It's changing the game."

Those who use the so-called playback maintain that judicious use of the apps is acceptable. On nature walks, they say, its use can be a less disruptive way to bring a bird into view, or elicit an audible response, rather than sending everyone thrashing through the thicket, possibly disrupting the birds' natural habitat. Moreover, they say, the use of audio isn't new in the birding world. Research scientists have long used playback methods with cassette tapes, and "pishing," or replicating a bird call, is a common practice.

While the use of these apps has sparked ire among traditionalists, professional birding organizations have been trying to find a middle ground. They want to harness the technology and its possibilities—even the Audubon Society has an app, featuring identification details for more than 800 species and eight hours of bird songs—but they want to make sure the technique is used with care.

David Sibley, author of five birding field guides and a respected authority in the community, has been wrestling with how to find balance. His guides are also offered as apps, complete with bird songs.

"You get something out of it because you get to see the birds up close and you're interacting with them, even though it's a sort of appeasing trickery that you're doing," Mr. Sibley said. "But at the same time—what if everybody does that? It would have some really negative impacts on the birds."

Mr. Sibley's guidelines are that birders should choose a particular spot and target, offer only 30 seconds of sound with a pause between snippets, and be subtle. Another tip: "Never use playback in a situation where another birder might hear you, unless you have his permission."

The National Audubon Society, meanwhile, is developing a comprehensive policy that goes beyond the current, brief "attractant noise" guidelines for its Bird Count. The group anticipates more than 70,000 participants in the current three-week event, and observers are allowed to use "very judicious" playback, but never in a way that would affect a bird's behavior "in any significant way."

One concern is the effect of the calls on the bird. Some say it can get stressed if it thinks the playback is a territorial threat. A predator may even be lying in wait. The bird could also leave its habitat or stop responding to the calls, realities scientists say make them nervous.

"The I-gadgets are incredibly dangerous to people who know nothing about birds," said avid birder Heidi Trudell, 28, who doesn't have a smartphone. "It's just a really slippery slope that I'm not comfortable with."

Last winter, Ms. Trudell says she challenged a woman pursuing a brown thrasher, a common bird that stays tucked into dense vegetation, in Texas' Big Bend National Park. She says the woman promptly retorted her approach was "standard protocol." No matter, Ms. Trudell replied. The National Park Service prohibits the use of bird call apps on its property, considering it an "intentional disturbance" to bird behavior and biology, according to a spokesman.

Adding to the tension is that neither side can point with certainty to scientific evidence supporting their position, as the smartphone debate is so new. In a study published in October in the journal PLOS ONE, Princeton University ornithologist Berton Harris, focusing on wrens in Ecuador, concluded frequent, regular playback "may have minor effects on wren behavior." The birds eventually stopped responding, and Dr. Harris said the next phase of his research will be to study nesting success to better understand if playback is harmful.

The biggest problem, said Jeffrey Gordon, president of the American Birding Association, is when playback is used thoughtlessly. "I find it so boorish when people are just out here, indiscriminately blasting stuff," said Mr. Gordon, who uses an app, but says he does so judiciously. "When we're getting out, we're trying to become more attentive to what's around us, and playback—or any kind of overreliance on gadgetry—can quickly start to erode the experience."



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Happy Valentines Day!



The Roanoke Valley Bird Club

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