



# Goldfinch Gazette

The Newsletter of the Rockingham Bird Club  
<http://rockinghambirdclub.com>

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## DECEMBER MEETING

**DATE:** Thursday, December 1, 2011

**TIME:** 7:00 PM

**PLACE:** Detwiler Auditorium, Virginia Mennonite Retirement Community - Rt. 42  
North, Harrisonburg, VA

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**PROGRAM:** Our meeting this month features a program which several members have requested, Dr. John Spahr's talking about his Big Year. One of the most ambitious (and perhaps craziest) adventures of a compulsive birder is to do a Big Year -- attempting to identify as many bird species as possible in one calendar year, within a defined geographic area. Although John Spahr of Staunton does not consider himself a highly competitive birder, he did just that in 2010 with his friend Bob Ake. It was actually Bob's idea and planning that convinced John to "tag along" for repetitive travels to Alaska, Arizona, Texas, Florida, California, New England, Canada and other locales in a quest to find as many birds as possible. It was indeed an adventure of a lifetime, the highlights of which John will share with his image-intensive presentation. As usual, our meeting will be at the Detweiler Auditorium at the Virginia Mennonite Retirement Center. **Beforehand, we will meet with John for dinner at The Blue Nile at 181 N. Main Street. If you would like to join the dinner group, please call Elizabeth Ihle at 234-8296.**

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## Field Trips – Diane Lepkowski

**Saturday, December 10 - Lake Shenandoah** - Greg Moyers will lead a walk around Lake Shenandoah, which may be followed by a stop at Lake Campbell. We hope to find waterfowl and will be on the lookout for winter residents including Brown Creeper, Winter Wren and Hermit Thrush. **Meet at the Lake Shenandoah parking lot at 9:00AM. Please contact Greg at [gwmoyers@msn.com](mailto:gwmoyers@msn.com) or 434-3029 if you plan to attend.**

**Thursday, December 22 -Hillandale Walk** - Meet at the playground parking lot at **8:00 AM.**

**2011 RBC Christmas Count – Saturday, December 17** – Our Christmas Bird Count date is fast approaching. We are excited to test a new plan this year. The club is officially sponsoring the CBC participant fee for members. Scouting for hot birds and sharing alerts

with the sector leaders and compiler is highly encouraged!

**Robyn Puffenbarger** encourages us to join together on the evening of the count with a **chili dinner at 6 PM**. Please be sure to call or e-mail **Bill Benish** at [wcbenish@verizon.net](mailto:wcbenish@verizon.net) or **908-7336** and include your chili preference (meat/vegetarian) if you think can join us.

If you live within the circle and cannot go afield, you can still contribute data with no fee as a **feeder-watcher**. Be sure to advise Bill on or shortly after the count day with your report of the amount of time and number of watchers/listeners along with the numbers of individuals by species. To review our circle boundaries and terrain, consider reviewing the two electronic resources linked below:

<http://birds.audubon.org/faq/where-can-i-see-cbc-circles-map>  
[www.google.com/earth](http://www.google.com/earth)

If you have not already, be sure to connect with a sector leader and advise Bill Benish of your contact information as well. – **Bill Benish**

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## **Bird Club Book Club - Maureen Gallagher-McLeod**

The book club will be meeting at 6 PM at Elizabeth Ihle's house on **December 15<sup>th</sup>** for a potluck meal and discussion. Our selection is a short book of bird humor, *Beyond Birdwatching* by Sill, Sill, and Sill. **Call Elizabeth Ihle at 234 8296 if you plan to attend.**

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## **Treasurer's Report - Steve White**

We have a current balance of \$13,915.29 in our checking account, which is very good for this time of year as fundraising and membership activity begins to slack off. There are still 52 members on my list from last fiscal year who have not yet renewed. If you intend to pay your dues, please do so at your earliest convenience either at the December 1st meeting or by mailing a check made out to RBC to 7738 Sparkling Springs Road; Singers Glen, VA 22850. Individual membership is \$15 and family membership is \$20. After the next meeting in early December, I will begin to heckle those who have not renewed with emails and phone calls to see if your non-renewal is intentional or an oversight. Thank you, and Good Birding to Everyone!

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## **Trip Reports**

### **Saw-whet Owl Banding Trip to Highland Retreat**

On the night of November 7, banding station “hosts” Clair Mellinger and Charles “Zig” Ziegenfus shared their extensive knowledge of and obvious appreciation for our region’s

smallest owl species, the Northern Saw-whet Owl. Ten RBC members with guests and a few Eastern Mennonite University students attended. Nearly everyone tromped up the ridge for the first net-check at 7 PM. Greeted by empty nets, a half-dozen of the group took Clair's suggestion to spend the next hour near the nets, quietly listening for nearby owls.

With the stage lit by a nearly full moon, what a treat that hour became! Mixed in with the repetitive electronic owl-call recording used to lure birds to the nets, the eerie and very different "whinny" call of nearby Saw-whet Owls was heard repeatedly; at least two owls were moving around in the treetops and heard by everyone. One was even glimpsed by a RBC member as it glided through the beam of a flashlight. Just before the 8 PM net-check, steady whinnies suddenly became brief, irregular sounds of what seemed like frustration or complaint, low near the nets. The complaints were apparently warranted -- one lone, captive owl graced the nets at 8 PM.

Back at the banding station, with just one owl in hand, Clair and Zig patiently answered questions and carefully explained the banding and data-collection process, including showing us how an owl's age and gender are determined. Based on size and weight the bird was declared a female, and we learned it had already been banded elsewhere. Cameras clicked away between the oohs and aahs that these beautiful critters can't help but inspire. A few of the group stayed for the 9 PM net-check, which turned up four more captive owls.

Early in the night, Clair showed off a new sound system that replaced the cumbersome and often troublesome combination of audio player, battery, and speakers that he'd rigged together and used in the past. Clair thanked the Rockingham Bird Club for donating the funds that allowed the purchase of this much needed-replacement -- a lightweight but powerful hand-held unit no bigger than a small "boom-box." – **Diane Lepkowski**

### **Goshawk Sighted on Hillandale Walk**

A Northern Goshawk flew over the parking lot at Hillandale Park in surprising fashion on November 18 as members of the Rockingham Bird Club gathered for the monthly walk. As we stood in the parking lot and with temperature in the 20s and a clear blue sky Tom Lord noticed a bird fast approaching from the west. It was accompanied by several harassing Blue Jays. Its rapid and near approach gave us clear but fleeting looks. What a fine way to start the day! By the time we reached the cabin we were still talking about the Goshawk. Two other members joined in by this time and of course the Goshawk talk continued. This was a life bird for some of us and was our first recollection of seeing a Goshawk at Hillandale Park. We continued to hear and see the Blue Jays and by now we settled in for the regular species. Crows, Robins, Flickers, Cardinals and White-crowned Sparrows were among the first seen. Surprise number two was a fine looking Fox Sparrow perched in full sunlight for a few minutes in one of the cedar trees to the left of the cabin. The entire group that now numbered seven got good looks at this special bird. Ken Hinkle mentioned that usually Fox Sparrows are "on the ground scratching like chickens" and as if the Fox Sparrow heard what it was supposed to be doing, it quickly dropped to the ground.

Along the west trail boundary we found Red-bellied Woodpecker, Yellow-rumped Warbler, and for several minutes Greg Moyers was hearing Towhees. By the time we made it to the northwest corner an Eastern Towhee pair perched on the fence and the rich black and reddish brown feathers reflected the morning sunlight. By now the temperature had risen into the 40s and another RBC member joined the search. Although the Blue Jays were vocal throughout the walk, we kept listening for the White-breasted Nuthatch call as they are typically present near the cabin. Today was an exception, but we finally encountered one after about two hours. As we passed the persimmon tree some of us sampled the fruit now sweetened by the cold and frosty weather of the past month. Other birds we encountered included Eastern Bluebird, Carolina Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, Dark-eyed Junco, and Mourning Doves. A Song Sparrow and Hermit Thrush were found along the streambed just upstream of the cabin bridge. A walk of the south loop added House Finch to the morning's total of 21 species. The walk is not complete anymore without a check of the golf course for a shrike but if one was present this nice morning, our eyes did not find it. Maybe we will see the shrike in December and we hope to see you in the park for our last walk in 2011. - **Tom Mizell**

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### **Bird Sightings – Ken Hinkle**

On November 9 two hummingbirds were seen by Kevin Shanks and his son Allen in the woods near their place. Kevin was not certain of the species but believed them to be Ruby-throated.

William Leigh, Greg Moyers and Diane Lepkowski observed a male Northern Pintail, two American Wigeons, and two Black Ducks at the Mount Solon Pond on November 13. They also saw three Northern Shovelers at a pond along Rt. 704 on the same day. Greg reported a Rough-legged Hawk in Augusta County a few days later.

On November 20 William found a flock of mixed blackbirds in the top of a sycamore tree along Bear Trap Road in Augusta County including 14 Rusty Blackbirds and 10 Red-winged Blackbirds.

On the morning of the same day at Lake Shenandoah, Diane Lepkowski, Greg Moyers and Dave Wendelken saw two Winter Wrens, a Brown Creeper and both kinglets. Greg spotted a Sharp-shinned Hawk deep in the pine woods, and on the water they observed at least three Pied-billed Grebes, three Ruddy Ducks and a handful of American Coots. While they were there a massive flock of blackbirds, apparently mostly Grackles, crossed the lake heading south. They also found a Dunlin at Leonard's Pond in the afternoon.

Back on November 4 I saw eight Northern Shovelers on Lake Shenandoah, a little earlier than I usually see these ducks. I have seen at least two Northern Harriers around my place in recent weeks. Once two together and another time one carrying what looked like a small bird in its talons while being chased by two or three American Crows.

## More Tributes to Kathleen Finnegan

Kathleen was a dear, dear friend. We met when the Rockingham Bird Club was formed in late 1974 -- I a novice birder and she an expert in all aspects of ornithology! We became instant friends. How lucky can you get?

Kathleen was always interested in sharing her knowledge with others and she decided one way would be to produce a slideshow on "Birds of Rockingham County" for our community's use. She selected bought slides, and I photographed habitat. She supplied all the facts to make this a well-used show by Clair Mellinger and Charles Ziegenfus in their college ornithology classes as well as in our own club and community.

Having produced a winner, she thought everyone should know of the near loss of our bluebirds and their struggle for recovery. So her next step was a slideshow of Ira Campbell's Bluebird Trail in the Broadway-Timberville area. It was my job to peep in all of his boxes and photograph nest eggs, baby birds and the surrounding habitat, but Kathleen told the wonderful story of the bird's survival with man's help. This show was given to garden clubs, Boy and Girl Scout Troops and Ruritan Clubs complete with plans on how to build and maintain bluebird houses. Both of these slide shows are kept in our Regional Library.

Each year Kathleen and her husband Mike spent many weeks helping with the fall migrating bird banding at Dolly Sods just atop Allegheny Front in West Virginia. Our club as well as individuals visited often. Kathleen always saved the best birds from the early AM nets, and we were always treated to lots of facts. This is where I first saw the inside of an owl's ear!

From the very beginning, Kathleen and Mike were responsible for our club's direction such as bird trails, plot studies and the 25-mile yearly bird counts. Her impetus dovetailed with the science departments of James Madison University and Eastern Mennonite University and led our group into a science-oriented club, keeping records and participating in national surveys. We were also tied into the Virginia Society of Ornithology and the Brooks Bird Club of West Virginia.

A day spent in the field with Kathleen and Mike never failed to give Dick and me knowledge, but also great pleasure. These were golden days for us, spent with gracious, giving people and mentors par excellence. Kathleen was much loved and admired. She will be deeply missed and always have a place in our hearts. – **Mary and Dick Smith**

Kathleen Finnegan played a number of roles in the Rockingham Bird Club and in my life. She was a rather quiet person but still very assertive in all the roles that she played. "Determined" may be a good descriptor, I believe. There is a lot I could and should say about her contributions but I will restrict myself to two areas. First she was always training us to be better birders and more systematic record keepers. Second, she wanted the bird club to

provide more birding activities that would contribute to the scientific understanding of the birds in our area.

Kathleen had lots of energy and was a very capable birder but seemed to feel that her major role was to encourage others, usually younger than herself, to take over roles or projects that she was very capable of herself. She didn't seem to be concerned about who got the credit plus she could accomplish much more of her goals by enlisting our help. She was always thinking of the future. "But Clair, who is going to do that when Birder X isn't around anymore? We have to be training young people to take over that project," she would earnestly remind me. Many of those training programs involved me. For example, ...

One of Kathleen and Mike's regular activities was to spend September at the Brooks Bird Club's banding station at Dolly Sods. Kathleen would tend the nets and Mike would draw and keep the rest of the crew amused. Kathleen could have been a bander herself but she chose to push Charles Ziegenfus and me to obtain bander's permits instead. I had no experience with bird banding and probably would never have gotten around to learning about it ... if it weren't for Kathleen. She took me to Dolly Sods and later arranged with George Hall and Ralph Bell, the station managers, to have me learn banding skills from the various banders who banded there every fall. She arranged everything. They had a trailer that they lived in but they would bring along a tent that I could use whenever I could find the time to stay up there for a couple of days. Later she also arranged for me to continue banding as a sub-permittee of Rob Simpson until I could acquire a Master Bander permit. It was all something that I enjoyed doing but something that probably wouldn't have happened without Kathleen's aggressive help. In many similar ways she helped many other "younger" persons in the club to get started, especially in the more scientific areas of birding.

Mike and Kathleen retired and moved back to this area around the time that the Rockingham Bird Club was formed and were instrumental in shaping the activities of the club. Kathleen was especially interested in the scientific contributions that club members could make to our knowledge of birds. She was a good birder and got into the field regularly but she wanted to do more than simply keep bird lists. She was quickly appointed the official record keeper of the club and developed all kinds of activities to improve our record keeping.

I hope that those of you who were at the program when the *Birds of Rockingham County* book was introduced, remember that I made particular reference to her part in making it happen. (If you don't, I owe her an apology.) YuLee Lerner was the first stimulus for the book, in that she was already working on the second edition of the "Birds of Augusta County" book, while I struggled with the first edition of our book. However, Kathleen had been working on our book for a long time too. She organized a group of us who met regularly for a time to pool our knowledge of the birds of Rockingham County, species by species. She herself could have written the book but instead she simply kept pushing the idea until, in a weak moment, I volunteered that it was something that I would like to do if I had the time, etc., etc. From that time on it became my book and she helped and pushed until it actually happened.

One aspect of our book that is different from many types of these books is that it contains some quantitative data rather than simply the semi-random observations of birders. The Virginia Atlas Project contributed some of that quantitative data but we also have Breeding Bird Survey and Breeding Bird Census data that was done expressly to describe the distribution and densities of bird populations in Rockingham County. Kathleen instigated and organized the collection of **all** that data. In Chapter 3, The People and the Records, you will find a more complete description of those projects and read the names of a number of us who put a lot of time into those quantitative studies; but the driving and organizing force behind all of it was Kathleen Finnegan.

Although she was trained as a nurse, she was extremely well informed about the scientific literature of ornithology. There are three major scientific ornithological journals in North America: *The Auk*, *The Condor*, and *Wilson's Bulletin*. Although these are not light reading, Kathleen subscribed to them all. I don't think that any of the college/university libraries in our area subscribed to all three of them. I certainly didn't. Kathleen often told me about new information that she had gleaned from these journals; information that she thought that I would (or should) be interested in. I know that she read the more popular birding literature too but she knew that lots of people were following that news and she needed to keep informed on the fronts where there were fewer "observers."

Kathleen was an amazing birder. I owe a lot to her as a mentor and friend. We will greatly miss her influence and contributions to the club. - **Clair Mellinger**

Kathleen was a great mentor to me. I will always treasure the memories of her introducing me to and training me on the Singing Male Survey which I did for about seven years on Kephart Run in the National Forest west of Rawley Springs. I had learned most of the common birds while growing up on a farm in nearby West Virginia, but I knew next to nothing about wood warblers. It was Kathleen who taught me the calls of the Black-throated Green Warbler, Ovenbird, Louisiana Waterthrush and many others. I had never recognized the musical call of the Wood Thrush nor the bubbly song of the Winter Wren until I went in the woods with Kathleen to say nothing of attuning my ears to the numerous Red-eyed Vireos and Acadian Flycatchers.

The first time Kathleen accompanied me to Kephart Run we were lucky enough to find a Wood Thrush on the nest just a few feet off the trail. We had another adventure on that first trip when we heard a loud roaring coming from away back deeper in the woods from the end of our traverse area. Presently out of nowhere a half dozen jeeps rolled through bearing families from the Tidewater Fourwheelers on their way out to Rt. 33.

One time Kathleen told me it helped if you had a little old lady at your side if you needed to aim your binoculars at a feeder in front of someone's house. - **Ken Hinkle**

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