

forest converted into open fields and home sites. "The deep woods birds have to go somewhere else. The Pileated Woodpecker is a prime example of a bird that suffers from that. They have to have very large old growth trees to live."

An article by Glenda Booth about global warming and birds that appeared in the January edition of *Virginia Wildlife* magazine says, "Nationally, nearly one-third of 800 bird species are endangered, threatened or in significant decline."

That may be true for waterfowl and songbirds, but for starlings, which by the way are not indigenous to the western hemisphere, the reverse is true. We count 1,684 of them in half a day. They spook, wheel and soar simultaneously, eerily controlled by their Borg-like collective. When the sun catches them just right, they look like showers of golden coins in the air. They also poop on everything. "Although they are a pain, they do a huge amount of insect consumption which is good," says van Santvoord.

And what about all those geese? "They used to always be migratory, but now there's a population that lives in this area year round. They've got everything they need right here."

We check out some ponds and are surprised that they are oddly blank of ducks and any other birds that are naturally attracted to water. We see a Great Blue Heron just outside of Gordonsville at noon. But by that time, we're still reveling in a sighting we made two hours earlier...a Bald Eagle.

He (she?) is magnificent, powerfully flapping over our heads, silhouetted by

iron gray skies. The eagle is another avian success story in Virginia. Years ago, they were considered unusual, "but now they're common," says Don Ober. Even Golden Eagles have been spied in this area.

Other unusual sightings include an Osprey last year, obviously way off course. But the powers that be at Audubon's Rare Bird Committee rejected it because it couldn't be proven with a photograph. Also rejected was a claim of two Sand Hill Cranes among a huge flock of Canada Geese on a farm pond in Somerset. They definitely made a wrong turn between their nesting grounds in Northern Canada and their wintertime digs in Mexico. And last year, three experienced local birders

PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT

This photo of a bald eagle was taken several years ago at an Orange County farm near Gordonsville. Recently, local sightings of our national symbol have become more common.



independently confirmed the presence of a Northern Shrike, known as the "butcher bird" for its unnerving practice of impaling its prey on thorns and barbed wire. Unusual birds this year include a Merlin spotted south of Gordonsville. "They got a good look at it," grins Ober.

He's looking for someone to take this thing over. At age 79, he has become somewhat hard of hearing and has gone through three hearing aids without success. "I wanted help hearing the birds," he complains, adding, "It's time to get some new blood in here."

For the aspiring bird-watcher, Don Ober recommends participating in the bird count and hooking up with an experienced watcher. "You can go as a recorder or as a passenger and learn a heck of a lot." Also, if you're a beginner, put up a bird feeder.

"That gets them close," says Ober. Then armed with a book like "The Sibley Guide to Birds," you can start identifying species. Still for experi-



PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT

Sometimes it's hard to identify small birds, particularly when it's dark and gray outside. These Ruby-crowned Kinglets were spied in the top of a tall tree during the annual Christmas Bird Count.

enced birders, identifying small birds is tough, especially in the wild. "They dive into the bushes and you can't see 'em," he grouses in exasperation. And how about those sparrows: according to our book, there are 14 species native to our area! How you tell them apart is beyond comprehension.

Concerning feeders, Buzz van Santvoord says be consistent; if you start feeding, continue to feed. "If you're going to go away for three weeks in the winter, they're now stuck in the middle of February with nothing to eat, and they get very dependent on that... Some people say don't feed the birds in the summer. I feed the birds year round...I like having them around."

Van Santvoord sums up birding: "Once you get the bite, like seeing something unusual, it's really fun; like seeing the eagle today, for example. It's sort of like hitting that great golf shot. You want to go back the next day and do it again."



PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT

Clouds, mist and rain kept bird count totals low this past January 2.



PHOTOS BY SUSIE AUDIBERT

Top photo, the Canadian Goose is a perfect example of a migratory bird that has settled down permanently in our area of Virginia. Also common, but curiously missing January 2, was the male and female Northern Cardinal. The cardinal is a popular state bird: Virginia, North Carolina, West Virginia, Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois all claim them.

It's the day after New Years, a chilly wet Sunday, the dawn barely glimmering on the horizon; perfect weather for rolling over and catching a few more z's. Not if you're a bird. For you, it's another work day staying alive; that is if you made it through that brutal December cold snap. The temperature today is warmer, in the low 50s, but it's falling through the 40s and it's raining off and on...a good day to hunker.

# Birds

This particular Sunday is no day off if you're a birdwatcher either. Instead of rolling over, you're up and at 'em because it's time for the annual Christmas Bird Count.

The epicenter for this operation is the Hardee's in Gordonsville. Ten surprisingly chipper and athletic looking souls huddle in a corner, nursing coffee and discussing strategy. At the center is Don Ober, the "compiler" for this "circle," which is one of 34 in the

state. He's been doing this since the mid-1980s. He hands out maps on which are scribed a seven-and-a-half-mile radius from Gordonsville in all directions. He's divided this territory up like a pie and assigns a wedge to each team.

We are assigned to Buzz van Santvoord's team and our slice of the pie is an area west of Gordonsville bounded by Routes 231 and 33. Under leaden skies, we set off, and

right off the bat, Buzz identifies a Mockingbird sitting in a bush bordering the parking lot. He comments that there is a friendly competitive element to the count; which team counts the most birds; the most species, and sees the most unusual birds. But he adds the real purpose is, "to get a snapshot of what actually lives here on a pretty much year-round basis."

Around here, at this time of year, you can expect to see as many as 85 different species. "That's a pretty



PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT

**Don Ober has been the Gordonsville circle compiler for the annual Christmas Bird Count since the mid 1980's. At age 79, he's looking for younger blood to take over the project.**

comprehensive list," continues van Santvoord, "but then again that's the winter list. The spring migration, you have all the warblers coming through and the orioles and all that. They're not on that list."

The goal today is to count every single bird that we see, not just the species. This can be difficult when you're startled by a flock of starlings. It's impossible to count every single bird; you have to estimate. The Christmas Bird Count is an inexact science, but it is still better than having no count at all.

Organized by the National Audubon Society, the event can happen any one day from December 14 through January 5. Taking weather into consideration, local compilers like Ober, choose the actual date for

their circle. When that day arrives, volunteers roam 15-mile diameter "circles" all across the country and count birds. The results are sent in to the National Audubon Society, which uses the data to "allow researchers, conservation biologists, and interested individuals to study the long-term health and status of bird populations across North America."

Back in the olden days, around this time of year, most of the men and boys in a community would go out on a group hunt to put a Christmas feast on the table. That tradition morphed into a senseless competition known as the Yuletide "side hunt," where the participants chose sides and went out and shot every wild animal they could see, feathered and furred! The team with the most dead animals won. Go figure.

In 1900, an ornithologist named Frank Chapman recognized that this mindless slaughter combined with other over-hunting practices was actually affecting overall bird populations. He proposed that the "sides" compete by counting birds, not shooting them. And so the Christmas Bird Count was born. It has been conducted every year since then.

This past January 2, for our team anyway, the count is about robins...hundreds of them, flying in loosely organized flocks. By noon, we estimate that 699 of them have flown past us. This seems rather strange when you consider that the harbinger of spring, the red, red, red robin, is bob, bob, bobbin' in the dead of winter. But experienced birders explain they are eating all manner of berries: holly berries, hack berries, cedar berries and the like.

Van Santvoord says the robins left the area when it was so cold around Christmas, but now that temperatures have moderated slightly, they're back. Some are actually doing their early-bird-gets-the-worm thing out in thawed fields and meadows. Oddly, Jim Ford, another experienced birder who counted a whole pie slice by himself, hardly saw any robins on this same day. Go figure.

He also didn't see many Cardinals, which is strange because we didn't either, and they are common as dirt around our feeder every winter. So common, by the way, that the Cardinal is not just our state bird, but North Carolina's, West Virginia's, Ohio's, Kentucky's, Indiana's and Illinois' as well. So where are they?

We surmise that because a front is coming through with rain and falling temperatures, they are holed up in the deep woods, with the Chickadees and Juncos. "You really need to get back in the woods, because

they're getting out of the wind. They're not really trying to do anything but just stay warm. And that's tough," says van Santvoord.

Therein lies another problem with the bird count. It pretty much has to be conducted from public roads.



PHOTO BY SUSIE AUDIBERT

**Carolina Chickadees and Goldfinches are common at bird feeders in our area, but on January 2, they were few and far between.**

Unless they have permission, volunteers are loath to go traipsing across privately owned land. As we slowly cruise through subdivisions, we can almost feel the stares. Just who are these guys in this SUV, bristling with camera lenses and binoculars? What are they doing in our neighborhood so early on a Sunday morning? One year, a counter returned to where she had parked her car to find that it had been towed!

Buzz van Santvoord has been a birder since he was 10. Growing up outside Minneapolis, he credits his Dad, the Boy Scouts and an assistant Scout Master in particular for kindling his interest in what other kids his age would consider a "sissy" hobby. Like some hunters, van Santvoord finds bird watching a rewarding excuse for being outdoors with nature. "I think people who like doing things like birding are often collector types," he philosophizes. "I'm a coin collector and a stamp collector for years...Birding is sorta like that. How many birds can you add to your life list."

He claims his life list is woefully incomplete; "probably less than 200 I would imagine." Still, that's not bad when you consider that there are 800 species native to North America, 10,000 worldwide, making birds the most diverse vertebrate of all.

And yes, it has now been confirmed, from discoveries in central China, that birds evolved from dinosaurs. According to an article in last month's *Smithsonian Magazine*, the discovery of a 150-million-year-old fossil, with "long thin structures protruding from its scaly skin, convinced most paleontologists that the animal was the first feathered dinosaur ever unearthed." Since then, a dozen more have been found. And get a load of this; this dinosaur is more closely related to T-Rex than it is to the pterodactyl. You might say that bird watching is not for sissies anymore!

It's definitely not for the faint of heart. You have to be in pretty good shape and brave all the elements like today's wind and cold and rain. And the really good ones, says Buzz, can identify birds not just by sight, but by sound. He claims he's weak at song identification, but easily identifies a Belted Kingfisher and a couple of Nuthatches by their calls. You also have to be keen-eyed. With the aid of binoculars, Buzz identifies a tiny bird called the Ruby-crowned Kinglet at the top of a tall tree, where it typically likes to hang out. He also aced a Yellow-rumped Warbler in a thicket.

Buzz's love affair with birds centers on raptors, like the Red Tail, Cooper's Hawk, and the Kestrel, each of whom represent a different family of birds of prey. He shakes his head in disgust at rabbit hunters who shoot every hawk they see. On this particular day, we see a couple of Red-shouldered Hawks and only one Red Tail who is being typically hassled by a parcel of crows.

Ah crows, there's an interesting bird. Buzz calls them a "family" bird. In other words, you see a flock of crows, they may all be related. Extremely intelligent and curious, crows were sometimes kept as pets by sailors who taught them to talk like parrots.

Back to the hawks. This past October, Buzz went up on Afton Mountain to count Broad-wing Hawks. The group counted 1,700 in one hour, 7,400 for the whole day, swirling in "kettles," riding the updrafts naturally created when prevailing westerly winds hit the west slope of the Blue Ridge. It's a free ride south, and for that matter, north.

Unlike the tiny hummingbird which flies non-stop 2,000 miles across the Gulf of Mexico every fall and



PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT

**Buzz van Santvoord has been an avid "birder" since he was 10 years old. He has volunteered to help with the Christmas Bird Count every year for the past 20 years or so.**

spring. Can you imagine? Van Santvoord tells a story of fishing boats hundreds of miles out to sea. "The rigging just fills up with these exhausted birds. They sit there for a day or so and try and get their strength back and then continue on."

Recently, new light has been cast on the mystery that is bird migration. Many birds migrate at night, as evidenced by the heaps of dead ones found at the base of cell phone towers and wind turbines that have been inadvertently erected in their flight paths.

And, van Santvoord says some birds are constantly migrating. "The old theory of migration is it just happened in the fall and it happened in the spring. The big birds follow the little birds. The birds of prey follow the food supply. Evidence now is that the birds of prey are moving all the time, down and back, down and back, not just this specific one month in the fall and one

month in the spring." Some that used to migrate, are now just hanging out instead. "The hawks we see today are pretty much here for the winter."

Another reason to bird watch: like the canary in the mine, their health and population mirrors the health of our environment. "Because of where they fall out on the food chain we're going to see the effect on them of bad things in the environment first; what influence humans are having on them with the reduction of habitat for example.

They are a good barometer like fish are a good barometer of the health of the planet. So, that gets me interested in helping to monitor that by doing this bird count."

Has he noticed any trends? "The last two years, it just seems that the quantity of birds that we've seen has been a lot less than it used to be, not so much only half as many species but also the quantities. It's like seeing only one Chickadee, you know, instead of seeing 50 Chickadees."

The Gordonsville circle's compiler, Don Ober confirms this. He says this year one experi-

enced volunteer came up with only 35 species, when she usually finds 45 or even 60. We found 29 in half a day.

This lack of birds and these "dead zones," might be a product of the weather. Last year, for example, the high temperature for the day was 24 degrees. Still, they counted 68 Northern Cardinals, 2,915 Eastern Starlings, 98 American Crows, 29 Turkey Vultures (don't call them buzzards; they're vultures) 42 Wild Turkeys, 1,534 Canada Geese, and only 98 American Robins. Today, just one of the many flocks of robins that dart around us has at least 98 birds in it, and we're only one-sixth of the circle's pie. At press time, the results of this year's count had not yet been tallied, but the numbers are definitely down.

Habitat is another major factor. In just a year's time, van Santvoord has witnessed large tracts of old-growth