



Audubon IMPORTANT BIRD AREAS

Winter 2006

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Welcome to the inaugural issue of the Virginia Important Bird Area (IBA) newsletter! We hope this quarterly bulletin will keep you abreast of what's happening with bird conservation in Virginia and can serve as your outlet for discovering volunteer activities that will benefit birds and other wildlife. In this issue, you'll learn about the nuts and bolts of the program, some of its many on-the-ground achievements, and how the IBA Program and its volunteers are making a real difference in the lives of Virginia's birds.



Piping Plover

In future editions, we'll feature more current events and 'newsy' pieces, such as newly released research on the endangered piping plover and the latest on the proposed Highland Country wind turbine project. Look for us again in mid-March to help you gear up for migration '07! For now, enjoy reading about Virginia IBA and don't forget to try your hand at our Quiz bird: you just might win great Audubon merchandise!

**WANT TO SUPPORT VIRGINIA IBA?
VISIT Pages 6-8 TO FIND OUT
ABOUT VOLUNTEER
OPPORTUNITIES AND OTHER WAYS
TO CONTRIBUTE!**



THE VIEW FROM MY PERCH

BY AIMEE WELDON

Maybe it was the Great Crested Flycatcher ‘wheeping’ from the lofty jungle in southern Costa Rica. Or perhaps it was catching sight of that Black-crowned Night Heron roosting in the highlands of Bolivia. Or that time in Guatemala when I was surprised to find that Turkey Vultures might actually be more numerous there than over I-95 in Virginia! Whenever the moment, whatever the prompt, it finally struck me just how truly meaningless political and cultural boundaries are for birds. Sure, I got a greater thrill from spying White-throated Toucans and Red-legged Honeycreepers, but it was catching a glimpse of these familiar U.S. species on my many trips abroad that has helped to reinvigorate my passion for conserving “our” migratory birds.



Aimee Weldon—Virginia IBA Coordinator

While it may be disappearing at an unfortunate rate, Central and South America still has plenty of good habitat left for birds. I’ve flown over the western Amazon and trust me, it’s shockingly vast. But here in Virginia, we’ve gotten a big head start on clearing or modifying our natural areas. We’re losing approximately 200 acres per day to development...that’s permanent loss of forests and farmland never to be recovered.

That’s why I believe so strongly in the mission of the Virginia IBA Program. We’re working to identify the absolute best remaining habitats in the state and focus conservation efforts at preserving or enhancing these essential places for birds. Places like the pristine barrier islands and marshes of the Barrier Island Lagoon IBA or the expansive rural farmlands and forests of the Allegheny Highlands IBA or the riparian forests along the Lower James River IBA.

These are some of our most impressive natural gems – and it’s evidenced by the often national or even global significance of these special places for ‘our’ birds! Of course, we coordinate our efforts with regional partners to ensure a networked and strategic system of protected habitats for migratory, breeding, and wintering birds. And what I really love most is that IBA is grassroots. *Really* grassroots---with nearly all of our dollars going directly to conserving Virginia’s birds and their ever-dwindling habitats.

I might add that while I do love birds and wildlife and feel passionate about preserving habitat for the voiceless, voteless critters, I also believe that *people need* open spaces, trees, and clean air and water, too. Even the most eager developer would agree that an October cruise along Skyline Drive beats looking at yet another charmless strip mall any day. So if you’re like me and believe that Virginia deserves to retain some forests, marsh, and farmland for future generations, please get involved with Virginia IBA and let’s work together to save ‘our’ birds and the green spaces on which we all depend. And may we all be able to hear the familiar ‘wheep’ of the Great-crested Flycatcher for many years to come!

Aimee Weldon

Learn more about the Virginia IBA Program at :
<http://www.audubon.org/bird/iba/virginia/>

DO YOU KNOW WHY *VIRGINIA IBA* MATTERS TO YOU!?

Shortly after completing her Master's work studying the ecology of the Indigo Bunting, Aimee Weldon took charge of the fledgling Virginia IBA Program in January 2005. "Taking the Virginia IBA position was a uniquely exciting opportunity for me. The Program was just a couple years old at the time with a wealth of opportunities in front of it. The IBA Program has achieved many important things in the last two years and it makes me feel good that I'm playing a part in conserving the birds of this ecologically rich state," she said.



Indigo Bunting—Photo by Aimee Weldon

The Virginia IBA Program is part of an international effort to identify and conserve a network of global sites that provide essential habitat for birds. Audubon, as the U.S. partner for BirdLife International, is working primarily through partnerships to preserve or enhance those places that are critical to birds during some part of their life cycle. "Since 1995, we have identified more than 2,000 IBAs nationally, encompassing over 200 million acres, and have begun conservation activities on many of these sites," said Greg Butcher, National Audubon's Director of Bird Conservation. Here in Virginia, we've already identified 14 IBAs with more on the way!

Identification of a site as an Important Bird Area indicates its unique importance to birds and serves as a valuable blueprint to guide conservation efforts and dollars toward these essential places.

Important Bird Areas:

- Are critical sites for breeding, wintering, and/or migrating birds.
- May encompass a few acres or many thousands, but are usually distinct in some meaningful way from the surrounding landscape.
- May include public and/or private lands that may be protected or unprotected. In other words, we let the birds decide!



Habitat Fragmentation

The IBA Program recognizes that habitat loss and fragmentation (and increasingly, climate change) are the most serious threats facing birds across the nation and the world. By working through partnerships with other conservation non-profits, federal, state, academic, and community groups, and people like you, we are working to conserve or restore those places that are critical to birds during some part of their life cycle. Read more about some of our recent efforts in *Spotlight on IBAs* on page 5.

The IBA Program recognizes its limitations and role in conservation today; we leave to others the arduous task of working to minimize the rapid destruction and degradation of our lands outside of IBAs, while we focus squarely on maintaining or improving habitats that are already in relatively good condition. It's a unique approach but one that is growing increasingly popular in the conservation community as more and more people realize how important it is to hold on to the gems that we have. Please contact Aimee if you'd like to learn more about the IBA Program or to make a contribution to our grassroots campaign to save Virginia's birds.

For more information on the national IBA Program, please visit: <http://www.audubon.org/bird/iba/index.html>

Here's a Gift Idea for the Holidays that is Guaranteed to Fit!

If you're interested in getting involved with or otherwise supporting the Virginia IBA Program, consider this: while many environmental non-profits are constantly scrambling for continued funding, [Americans spend \\$250 Billion](#) each year buying birthday, wedding, and holiday gifts. A great way to show your giving spirit with family and friends isn't by buying them something they don't want (vacuum) or isn't going to fit (bad sweater), but rather by making a gift donation in their name that will help conserve Virginia and its birds. Please consider a generous conservation donation to the IBA Program in your loved one's name today! To make your tax-deductible contribution, please contact Aimee Weldon at aweldon@audubon.org or address and mail your check to:

Virginia Audubon Council
2302 A Park Ave
Richmond, VA 23220



SPOTLIGHT ON IBAS

Lower James River Important Bird Area

The Lower James River IBA, stretching over 40 river miles of pristine shorelines, wooded and emergent wetlands, and rural farmlands, is a true gem within an ever-increasing suburban landscape. Thanks to the dedicated efforts of many conservation landowners and a number of large farms and historic plantations spread throughout, this IBA is one of state, regional, and national significance for a number of Virginia's bird species.

Most notably, this area is known for its Bald Eagle populations and visitors are almost guaranteed a sighting of this magnificent bird. In fact, this IBA is one of the most important areas for breeding and migrating eagles along the Atlantic coast, not to mention the role it plays in supporting large populations of Great Blue Herons, Osprey, and other large fish-eating birds.



Bald Eagle—Photo by Joe Ellis

Considering that less than 40 years ago the James River lost all three of these species due to DDT, Kepone, and other contaminants, this turnaround is truly impressive and something we should all be proud of!

The Lower James River IBA also contains extensive wooded wetlands that support significant populations of Prothonotary warblers, Yellow-throated vireos, Rusty blackbirds, Red-headed woodpeckers, and others that rely on this increasingly uncommon habitat type throughout the year. Prothonotary warblers are striking yellow birds and the only eastern warbler to rely on cavities to nest. They are widespread throughout the IBA where you can spot them (and hear them!) in almost any forested area near slow or standing water.



Prothonotary Warbler

The agricultural uplands support some of the largest grassland bird populations in the coastal plain of Virginia and the plaintive notes of the Eastern meadowlark and the insect-like trill of the Grasshopper sparrow are common backdrops in a largely pastoral landscape. Grassland species as a whole are experiencing the highest rates of decline of any grouping of species and these farms and plantations are playing a key role in conserving them here in Virginia.

Although the IBA is currently playing a valuable role in maintaining native birds, the area is facing many emerging threats. Most notably, the continued expansion of residential and urban development is converting key shoreline and farmland habitats that so many birds depend upon, leading not only to reduced habitat but also to increased disturbance of sensitive birds like eagles and herons. A successful conservation strategy for the Lower James River IBA must involve not only conservation groups, but engagement of community members like you. Read on to see how local volunteers banded together to restore a 20 acre riparian buffer within the Lower James River IBA!

Volunteers flock to tree planting at Lower James River Important Bird Area

Once organizations joined forces, projects to enhance Presquile National Wildlife Refuge took on a life of their own

Sometimes if conditions are right, a series of ideas will converge, and much like a network of small streams, pick up velocity and become a mighty force just like the river they are intended to serve. That's what happened in the lower James River IBA this year, as a 20-acre tree planting project designed to quell a serious erosion problem at Presquile National Wildlife Refuge naturally merged with an effort aimed at designating and protecting that stretch of river as a Virginia Important Bird area by the National Audubon Society.

The 1300 acre refuge and surrounding wetlands have long been revered as a shining pearl in a string of land features that provide birds with what they most need: healthy habitat for roosting, breeding and foraging. This recently earned the island and larger swath of river and surrounding habitats an "Important Bird Area" designation by the Virginia IBA Program.

Aimee Weldon noted that the lower James River IBA supports one of the densest breeding populations of bald eagles in the mid-Atlantic region. "Forty-two eagle pairs nested here in 2006 and hundreds of non-breeding eagles spend their summers and winters within the IBA each year," she added. Large Great Blue Heron colonies, Prothonotary Warblers, and numerous grass and shrubland birds are also common within the IBA.

This stretch of river below Richmond—and the associated upland habitats—are held largely in private ownership. Large plantations and historic properties line the river here, hailing back to their beginnings in colonial Virginia. Today, those tracts are augmented by conservation and wildlife areas managed by federal and state agencies, Chesterfield and Henrico counties, industry and Virginia Commonwealth University. The result is a large, contiguous corridor of riverside habitat that has remained relatively healthy despite changing land uses.

But the river has faced other man-made challenges; specifically, a series of channels designed to straighten the river in an area known as "The Curles" during the 1930s to ease the way for ships

SAVE THE UPPER BLUE RIDGE MOUNTAINS IBA!!

The Upper Blue Ridge Mountains IBA runs along the Blue Ridge spine and fully contains Shenandoah National Park. Over 23% of the plant community in the Park is now comprised of non-native species, seriously compromising habitat for native birds!

Join Audubon and the National Park Service in removing Oriental bitter-sweet, Mile-a-minute vine, Japanese barberry and other invaders along Skyline Drive near Thornton Gap (near U.S. 211) on:

February 17: 9am – 12 pm

March 10: 9am – 12 pm

April 7: 9am – 12 pm

Volunteers get **Free Admission** to the Park!

To sign up contact Aimee at:

aweldon@audubon.org

804.752.5850



Eroded bank at Presquile—Photo by Amber Foster

southern end of the refuge has been invaded by the aggressive Johnson grass, a non-native plant that outcompetes its neighbors and forms dense, single-species stands.

To stem the tide of the advancing Johnson grass and the eroding banks, the James River Association had identified the refuge as a prime candidate for a tree-planting project to slow the erosion and nutrient loads fouling the water, and was working with the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to stamp out the Johnson grass.



Invasive Johnson Grass —Photo by Amber Foster

The restoration efforts and Important Bird Area designation eventually converged into one stream of thought last January as everyone realized a common focal point at Presquile. By working together and sharing talents, the tree planting grew into an even larger outreach effort—one that targeted birding clubs, other conservation groups and the interested public through a mass media campaign that notified residents and neighboring businesses.

Ultimately, 3,500 native trees and shrubs were planted on eight designated workdays spanning a six-week period this past fall. More than 200 citizens participated—families, church groups, bird enthusiasts, scouts and employees of large corporations such as DuPont and Phillip Morris.



Volunteer tree planters —Photo by Joe Ellis

Fish and Wildlife Service employees used previous tree-planting experiences as well as historical records to identify the best native species for the natural conditions faced on the island—occasional droughts, high summer temperatures, and plenty of wind. Several varieties of oaks were picked because of their large acorn production at maturity, as well as faster growers, like pine, tulip poplar and smaller dogwoods and shrubs. The trees will eventually shade out and kill the invasive Johnson grass while offering wildlife benefits in the form of food and shelter.



Volunteer tree planters (above and below) —Photo by Joe Ellis

“This project was a catalyst that changed some people’s view of what cooperative conservation is all about,” said Weldon. “Volunteers now see the bigger picture and how the mission of one group dovetails into another.”



A completed field of trees—Photo by Aimee Weldon

Perhaps Joe Ellis, a committed volunteer and steward of the refuge for years, said it best, “In a few years, I look forward to visiting Presquile National Wildlife Refuge with my children and grandchildren and seeing bald eagles roosting in our trees!”

Portions of this article were excerpted with permission from an article recently published in the Bay Journal by Sally Mills

Adopt an IBA!

Richmond Audubon Takes Lower James River IBA Under its Wing

Conservation of special places like the Lower James River IBA depends upon the active participation of the local community. Recognizing the unique and fragile nature of this local gem, Richmond Audubon Society (RAS) has officially committed to 'Adopting' the IBA. This means that RAS will take a leadership role in activities such as long-term monitoring of bird populations, coordinating or assisting with conservation projects like native tree plantings or invasive species removal, developing educational materials, or serving as advocates for the IBA as threats arise. This was a natural progression for Richmond Audubon as they have been serving in a similar capacity on Presquile NWR, at the heart of the IBA, for several years. They contributed both Birdathon funds and volunteers to the Presquile planting project (Page 6) and now intend to expand their focus to include additional partners and conservation opportunities within the entire IBA. **Thank you Richmond Audubon!**

Think your group would be interested in adopting a lonely IBA near you? Contact Aimee Weldon (aweldon@audubon.org; 804.752.5850) for more information.

Don't forget to put the upcoming Highland Maple Festival on your calendar! Highland County, part of the Allegheny Highlands IBA, is well known for producing rare and exciting birds!



49th annual

Highland Maple Festival

Highland County, Virginia

Saturday & Sunday,
March 10-11, 2007

Saturday & Sunday,
March 17-18, 2007

Sugar Camp Tours ~ Buckwheat & Pancake Breakfasts
Clogging, Bluegrass & Country Music ~ Fine Arts & Crafts

16 Years on Southeast Tourism Society's Top 20 Events

Contact Information: www.highlandcounty.org or (540) 468-2550.



Audubon IMPORTANT BIRD AREAS

NAME THAT AVE!

If you can name this bird, email your answer by January 10 to Aimee Weldon at : aweldon@audubon.org with "IBA Bird Contest" in the Subject line.

We'll randomly draw from all the correct answers and if you're the lucky winner, you'll receive free Audubon prizes! We'll email out the correct answer after the drawing... Good luck!



Photo donated by Roger Mayhorn

*Happy Holidays from
Audubon!*