



Audubon IMPORTANT BIRD AREAS

THE QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER OF THE VIRGINIA IMPORTANT BIRD AREAS PROGRAM

Summer 2007

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Dear Virginia bird lovers,

Summer is finally here and the birds have been busy these last few months selecting attractive mates, building nests, and rearing the little ones. Song has noticeably dropped off this month as adults busily feed demanding youngsters, preparing them for the long journey ahead of them or possibly even trying to squeeze in one last brood before summer's end.

This signals the end of the spring survey season and boy was Audubon—or more accurately, Audubon's volunteers—busy this year! Close to 30 volunteer birders collected valuable breeding bird survey data on three different IBAs across the state.



Read on to find out what they uncovered—pretty exciting stuff!

Also, learn about where Virginia's birds stand in the State of the Birds Report, the new Culpeper Basin IBA, the new Virginia eBird site coming soon, and a great workshop opportunity on the Northern Neck! Happy reading!



THE VIEW FROM MY PERCH

BY AIMEE WELDON

As many of you have probably read by now, Audubon's recent *State of the Birds: Common Birds in Decline* report (<http://www.audubon.org/bird/stateofthebirds>) sounds the alarm for all of us to pay closer attention to the message that birds are unwittingly telling us. And that message is loud and clear: that we humans are treading heavy upon the land, resulting in a truly alarming decline in far too many species of birds.



Aimee Weldon—Virginia IBA Coordinator

The State of the Birds assessment uniquely profiles so-called 'common species', or those birds with populations numbering at least 500,000 individuals. Since one of the priorities of the Virginia IBA Program is to keep common birds common, this report is eye-opening and forces all of us in the conservation community to reassess our efforts for some species that were, to be honest, previously overlooked. Certainly, many of the declining species are no surprise (e.g., pintails, bobwhites, shrikes) but did anyone expect that common grackle had declined by 61 percent or that red-winged blackbirds were down more than 70 percent!?

We've all heard the laundry list of reasons why so many bird species are in freefall, so I won't bother to restate those details here. Instead, I will focus on tangible ways that we can help populations stabilize and ultimately recover. After all, birds are great bellwethers for overall environmental health, and a sharp decline in 'common' birds certainly spells bad news for other wildlife and people, too. And of course, there *is* still time to make a difference! I, for one, would be heartbroken if my future great-grandchildren never had the opportunity to hear the melodic song of the meadowlark or gaze upon the magnificence of a drake pintail.

So what to do? Although most of the listed species are not 'backyard birds', that doesn't mean conservation efforts shouldn't start at home. That's lesson #1 in working to keep common birds common. Lord help us if we ever get to the point where cardinals and goldfinches make the list! At home, eliminate pesticides, plant native vegetation, keep cats indoors, and work to eliminate window strikes. Visit www.audubon.org/bird/at_home/index.html to learn more. Creating even a small natural area in your backyard including a few pokeweed plants, a brush pile, or small pond can have a remarkable effect on the number and diversity of wild things that choose to visit.

If you own some acreage, the federal government will, in many cases, provide financial and technical assistance to restore or protect wildlife habitats through Farm Bill incentive programs. Even if you don't own eligible land, you can still protect grassland species by urging continued funding for certain Farm Bill programs, such as Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), which pay farmers to restore marginal farmlands and support several million acres of good bird habitat.

And to have the maximum impact on all birds rare and common, become a vocal advocate for preserving local green space, pastoral areas, and state and federal lands. Audubon will even alert you when your help is most critically needed if you sign up at <http://audubonaction.org/audubon/home.html>. I cannot overemphasize how important each of our voices is. Elected officials are merely public servants, and they invariably respond to the wishes of their constituents. Get involved! Make sure your voice is heard by the people representing your county, district, and state. I assure you they will consider your views. Your children and the birds you've helped to protect will surely thank you for it!

—Aimee Weldon

Please visit www.audubon.org/bird/at_home/ to learn more about how to create a healthy backyard.

VIRGINIA'S COMMON BIRDS IN DECLINE

Many of our most common and beloved birds are experiencing precipitous population declines. Analyzing forty years of bird population data collected by citizen scientists for Audubon's Christmas Bird Count, combined, for the first time, with Breeding Bird Survey data from the U.S. Geological Survey, Audubon has identified our nation's most vulnerable common birds (<http://stateofthebirds.audubon.org/CBID>). Additional analyses have focused on state level trends. Some mirror the national picture, while others reveal local and regional differences. The 5 birds below are suffering the most serious population declines in Virginia. Along with their national *Common Birds in Decline* list mates, they showcase the need for vigilance in protecting local habitats—particularly open lands—and the health of our environment. Working together, we really can—and must—make a difference!

VIRGINIA'S TOP 5 VULNERABLE COMMON BIRDS

Approximate Percent Decline Since 1967



LOGGERHEAD SHRIKE (*Lanius ludovicianus*)

A bird of open grassy areas dotted with trees such as hawthorns which they use to impale their prey, the precipitous decline of this species is somewhat enigmatic. They have disappeared from their former breeding range on the coastal plain and are becoming increasingly rare in the Ridge and Valley. Declines are likely tied to habitat loss, pesticides, and vehicle collisions.

>98%



RUSTY BLACKBIRD (*Euphagus carolinus*)

A winter resident in Virginia and the only blackbird restricted exclusively to wooded wetlands, this species has been exhibiting among the highest rates of declines of North American bird species. Reasons for the declines are unclear but may include loss of wetland habitat on southeastern wintering grounds, drying of wetlands and shifts in prey base due to global warming on breeding grounds, competition with other blackbirds, and disease.

>96%



NORTHERN BOBWHITE (*Colinus virginianus*)

This species has largely vanished from many areas of its former Virginia range. Once common, the Bobwhite is now almost non-existent on Christmas Bird Counts and uncommon on Breeding Bird Surveys. Losses are almost certainly due to habitat loss from development, clean farming techniques, and plantation forestry.

>82%



FIELD SPARROW (*Spizella pusilla*)

Typically found in abandoned fields amid scattered shrubs and trees, this sparrow is dependent on successional habitat, which, by definition, is ephemeral. In addition, intensified agriculture, natural succession of old fields to forest, and development are all taking a toll on its nesting habitat.

>76%



EASTERN MEADOWLARK (*Sturnella magna*)

Like many grassland birds, meadowlarks are threatened by changing agricultural practices, including monoculture farming and early season mowing. In addition, development of open fields is contributing to habitat loss. Smart growth strategies should encourage the retention of open land.

>72%

In Search of the Cerulean Warbler:

Volunteers Help Survey the Upper Blue Ridge Mountains IBA

The rare and declining sky-blue Cerulean Warbler always seems to taunt the hopeful birder. A bird of the tree-tops, these beautiful denizens of deciduous forests are notoriously difficult to spot—both nesting and foraging high in the forest canopy. Many a birder is forced to retire each day with a sore neck and not



so much as even a glimpse of belly feathers, leaving only with the privilege of hearing their buzzy song.

Unfortunately, Ceruleans overall

have become even harder to find as populations have declined by more than 6 percent annually since the late 1960s in the Mid-Atlantic Ridge and Valley region, largely due to the loss of large blocks of mature forest on their breeding and wintering grounds. Range-wide declines have propelled the Cerulean Warbler to the top of more than one conservation concern list, including the Audubon Red Watch List, Partners in Flight Watch List of Species of Continental Importance, and the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries' list of Tier II species, to name a few.

The largest Cerulean Warbler population in Virginia is found along the forested ridge lines of the Upper Blue Ridge Mountains IBA, making this a key focal area for conservation. However, although the area is frequently visited by birders, it has not been systematically surveyed and the current population status of Ceruleans within the IBA remains uncertain.

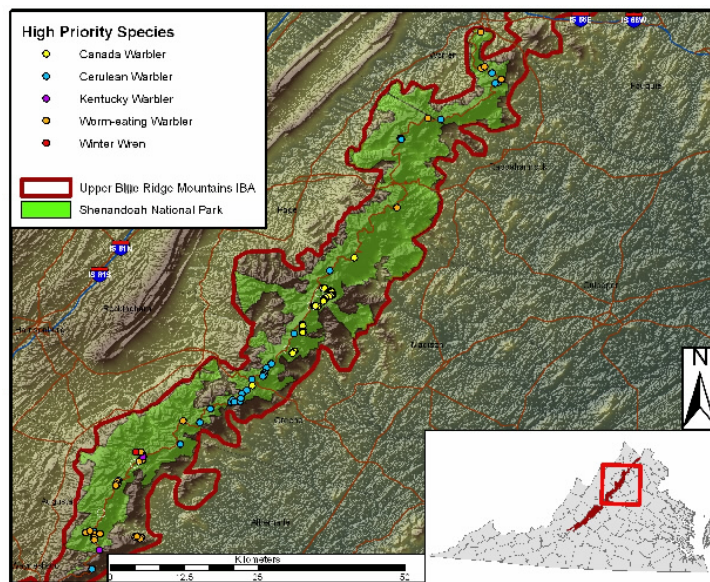
To begin filling this gap, Audubon, in partnership

with the National Park Service and The Nature Conservancy, developed a system of survey routes in potential habitat throughout the southern two-thirds of Shenandoah National Park and adjacent private lands. These surveys represent a pilot project that we intend to expand throughout the entire IBA in the future.

Volunteer birders—many from the local Monticello and Augusta Bird Clubs who have adopted the IBA—turned out in impressive numbers to help with the survey effort. In total, more than 20 volunteers covered over 30 routes—far exceeding our target goal of 20 routes! They documented not only Cerulean Warblers but other priority breeding species such as the Worm-eating Warbler, Canada Warbler, Winter Wren, and Kentucky Warbler.

In total, volunteers documented 21 Cerulean Warblers throughout the survey area. Thirteen additional Ceruleans were detected on USGS BBS routes in the Park, bringing the total to 34 birds detected this year. These preliminary results, combined with the results of expanded future surveys, will be used to better assess the status of the Cerulean Warbler population within the IBA and to highlight particularly important areas for conservation. If you have additional sightings to add to the map, please let us know!

Other interesting results included a large pocket of Canada Warblers roughly distributed along a 20 mile stretch between mile post 46 and 66. This area has experienced heavy ice-storm damage and the death of large hemlocks due to the hemlock woolly adelgid, allowing development of a dense shrub layer and numerous fallen logs that are favored by this species. Worm-eating Warblers favored the drier, lower-elevation slopes of the northern and southern regions of the Park where disturbance was less severe.



Interested in helping out next year? Please contact Aimee at aweldon@audubon.org to be added to the list!

SPOTLIGHT ON IBAS

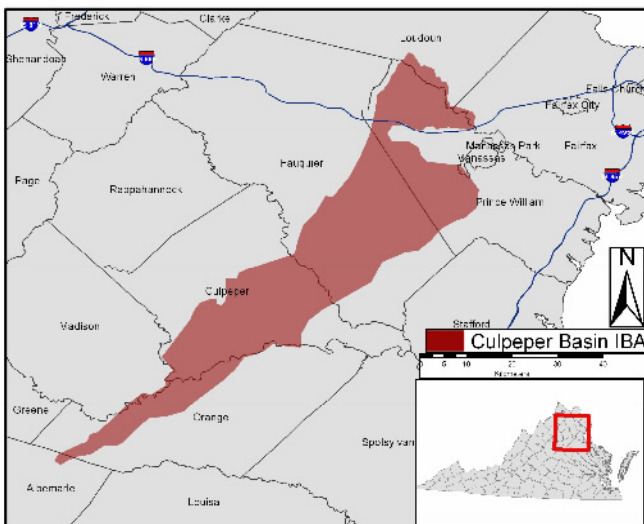
Culpeper Basin Important Bird Area

The Culpeper Basin IBA extends through a large swath of the outer Piedmont of northern Virginia, from Loudoun County southwest to its southern terminus in Orange County. Geologically and ecologically unique, the IBA contains over 300,000 acres of an ancient Triassic depression that formed over 200 million years ago as the present day North American continent pulled away from Africa. Unique soils originate from ancient volcanic activity and subsequent sedimentary soils that washed down from the Appalachians. These soils now support rare vegetative communities, including prairie-like grasses and shrubs, not commonly found elsewhere in the Piedmont.

Although historically the area was probably forested in hardwoods, centuries of human disturbance such as logging, clearing, and burning, have transformed the large, fertile Basin into a mosaic of farms, fields, and secondary woodlots. The combination of unique soils, and thus rare plant communities, as well as the rural character of the land make the Culpeper Basin IBA a modern-day Mecca for grass and shrubland birds.

The area supports an amazing diversity of birds, many of which are rare in Virginia and are not generally found outside of the IBA. Volunteer surveys within the Basin this year additionally revealed impressive numbers of more common species such as Eastern Meadowlarks, Field Sparrows, Grasshopper Sparrows, and others. Considering that many of these species are showing declines of more than 80% in Virginia, the Culpeper Basin is a truly special place indeed and one worth protecting!

Culpeper Basin IBA



Priority Bird Species of the Culpeper Basin IBA

- **Barn Owl**—over 40 nesting pairs bolstered in part by an active nest box program
- **Upland Sandpiper**—Virginia's only known nesting pair; groups of up to 10 individuals seen during migration
- **Henslow's Sparrow**—1 pair confirmed in 2005
- **Short-eared Owl**—regular but uncommon winter resident usually found in small groups
- **Loggerhead Shrike**—becoming increasingly rare; scattered summer and winter records
- **Dickcissel**—local pockets throughout the IBA
- **Eastern Meadowlark**—over 200 counted in 2007
- **Field Sparrow**—66 counted in 2007
- **Grasshopper Sparrow**—64 counted in 2007
- **Northern Bobwhite**—24 counted in 2007
- **Prairie Warbler**—20 counted in 2007

Despite its tremendous value to Virginia's grassland bird species and the many threats it is facing, only 3% of the the Culpeper Basin IBA is formally protected, the least of any IBA!. Not surprisingly, the greatest threat arises from the widespread expansion of urban areas, which is placing enormous development pressure on what was once rural farmland, changing both the rural character and natural value of the landscape for birds. Such growth, as well as changes in farming practices, threatens birds through removal of shrubby hedgerows and fallow areas, loss of old farm structures and large grassy fields that Barn Owls use to nest and hunt, use of pesticides, and mowing during the breeding season to name just a few.

Ensuring the future of these vulnerable species will depend on the involvement of local communities, farmers, landowners, and local decision makers. The Virginia IBA Program is working with partners IBA in the area to conserve the best of what's left. Together, we will be increasingly working to promote the use of Farm Bill programs in key areas of the IBA to ensure that the most valuable habitats are restored. Please contact Aimee to learn more about the programs available to you.

eBird is Coming to Virginia!

Launched in 2002 by Audubon and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, eBird has revolutionized how the birding community collects, reports, and accesses information about birds. The web site, www.ebird.org, has quickly amassed one of the most impressive biodiversity data sets in existence today, and all from volunteer birders



like you and I! Another perk is that eBird organizes, summarizes, and tracks all of your personal birding information over time. The program has thus far yielded incredibly valuable information regarding trends in bird populations and distributions, and has been used by amateur birders, conservationists, and professional

ornithologists alike. It's tools like eBird that will inform and guide the future of strategic, well-planned bird conservation.

Virginia is consistently among the top states submitting bird checklists, indicating a large interest in recording bird observations in our state. Because of this over-

whelming interest, we are now scheduled to host our own state eBird page under the national eBird web site. Thanks to the Virginia Society of Ornithology and the Coastal Virginia Wildlife Observatory, the Virginia eBird page should be up and running in September and will feature Virginia-specific articles and pictures, written and taken by area birders and scientists. Avian and environmental education will be the main focus of the articles and the organizers hope to generate even more Virginia checklist submissions to advance the knowledge of Virginia's unique and dynamic bird life.

eBird will be a particularly valuable tool to help track the status of priority birds on Virginia's Important Bird Areas. Citizens can use eBird to provide much needed and ongoing data about bird populations in areas that are often under-surveyed by the conservation community. It can also be used to track the value of our on-the-ground restoration efforts for birds, such as the large tree-planting effort conducted on Presquile NWR in the Lower James River IBA. So, keep your eyes open for the official launch. I know I'm looking forward to it!

For more information about Virginia eBird please contact John Spahr (Jspahr@AugustaMed.com) or Brian Taber (Taberzz@aol.com)

Adoption Update!

New River Valley Bird Club Conducts 1st Breeding Bird Surveys at the Radford Army Ammunition Plant IBA

In our last newsletter we announced that the New River Valley Bird Club had committed to Adopting the local Radford Army Ammunition Plant IBA. One of their first tasks as an Adoption Group was to design and conduct much needed bird surveys on the IBA, which has been known to support Virginia's only population of Henslow's Sparrows. The Club carried out the first of these surveys this spring, targeting some of the higher priority areas of the site. Unfortunately, no Henslow's were found. However, the group was very excited to report 47 Northern Bobwhite! That's more than one and a half birds per survey point! Other grass and shrubland birds such as Eastern Meadowlarks, Grasshopper Sparrows, and Field Sparrows were also common but did not surpass the quail in number. It's not often that you get to say that! The group plans to continue the surveys next year and will begin invasive species removal efforts in certain parts of the IBA.

You're Invited!

To a FREE Invasive Plants Workshop on the Northern Neck

Have you ever wondered what those fast-growing, stinky, walnut-like trees are that are growing along public roadways, parks, or even your own backyard? Or how about those dense stands of tall, feathery reeds that are overtaking marshes that once held wintering ducks? Or perhaps you've observed stately trees being overtaken by dense masses of creeping vines?

Chances are, you're watching a silent invasion taking place – of the botanical kind. These pesky non-natives are flourishing in Virginia at the expense of our native bird and wildlife habitat and we need your help to keep them under control! .

Join the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Wildlife Refuge Friends, the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, Menokin Foundation, Northern Neck Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society, the National Audubon Society, and other leaders for the first community workshop on **Management of Invasive Alien Plants** on the Northern Neck. **FREE lunch** is provided while you learn how to identify many of the common invaders, why they are a threat to humans and wildlife, and best of all – how to get rid of them! Feel like taking some aggression out on a stand of Tree of Heaven? We do too and we'll be sure to provide the opportunity!

The workshop will take place on **July 21, 2007 from 10am-2pm** at the King Conservation & Visitors Center at Menokin, an historic site in Richmond County near Warsaw. Menokin lies within the recently identified Lower Rappahannock River IBA and near the Rappahannock River Valley NWR, where Bald Eagles abound and Neotropical migrants are plenty so come early to do some birding!

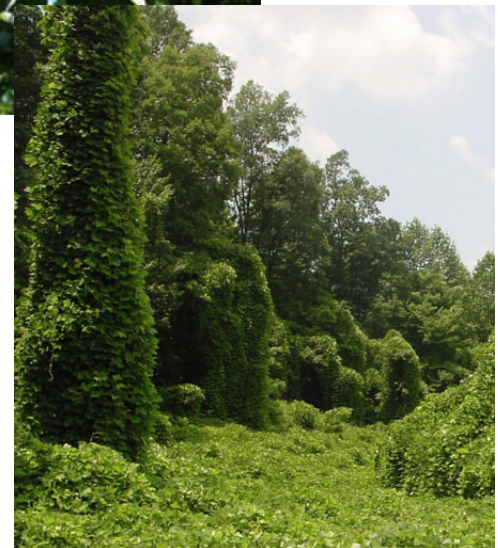
Space is limited to 50 participants so reserve your space now by contacting Sarah Pope or Beth Reavis of the Menokin Foundation at (804)333-1776, menokin@menokin.org, www.menokin.org. For questions about the agenda, please call Sandy Spencer, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at (804)333-1470.



Phragmites



Tree of Heaven



Kudzu

NAME THAT AVE!

Ever been mooned by a songbird before? Well you have now! If you can name this exhibitionist, email your answer by July 27th to Aimee Weldon at: aweldon@audubon.org with 'IBA Bird Contest' in the Subject line.



Photo by Giff Beaton

We'll randomly draw from all the correct answers and if you're the lucky winner, you'll receive a beautifully illustrated, hardcover Smithsonian Book of National Wildlife Refuges!

Good Luck!



Photo by Giff Beaton

Congratulations to our last winner, Scott Baron, for naming the last quiz bird as a... Western Palm Warbler (left).

**To Read more about other IBAs in Virginia, please visit our website at:
<http://www.audubon.org/bird/iba/virginia/>**