



The Mountain Chat

Newsletter of the Mountaineer Chapter of the National Audubon Society

Volume 40 No. 1

Winter/Spring 2015

2014 Christmas Bird Count Again Breaks Records

By LeJay Graffious, CBC Coordinator

Mountaineer Chapter of the National Audubon Society continues to break our previous records during the annual Christmas Bird Count (CBC). We exceeded all records for count day species. This year we tallied 84 species which is 3 species higher than last year. We had the great participation of 41 people to date. There were 38 birders in the field and an additional 3 counting at their feeders. Count week species added an additional 9 species.

We were not expecting a great day due to weather, which was overcast, and no real strong weather fronts in the north to force the waterfowl south. We were not finding many individual birds, but the species count was unusually high. The ninety-three species identified during count week is a very respectable total for this section of the Appalachian Mountains. I attribute the count's success to more experienced, expert birders volunteering and doing more scouting prior to the count day.

On December 20, plus three days prior and three days following, forty-one volunteers throughout Monongalia County took part in an adventure that has become tradition across generations. Families and students, birders and scientists, armed with binoculars, bird guides and checklists go out on an annual mission – several before dawn. The desire to both make a difference and to experience the beauty of nature has driven dedicated people to leave the comfort of a warm house during the Holiday season.

The most unusual new species for our CBC was the Rufous Hummingbird. Mike Slaven was lucky enough to attract one to his backyard inside our count circle. He had been maintaining a feeding station and the bird continued to linger there into January.

Terry Bronson found 65 of the 68 Black Vultures for the day. We had four owl species: 22 Screech Owls; 3 Great Horned Owls; 8 Barred Owls; and Derek Courtney and Ross Brittan each found a Northern Saw-whet. We had nine species of sparrows: 9 Eastern Towhees; 2 American Tree Sparrows; 36 Field Sparrows; 159 Song Sparrows; one count week Fox Sparrow; 5 Swamp Sparrows which were found by Alan Clark; 145 White-throated Sparrows; a high count of 31 White-crowned Sparrows; and 260 Dark-eyed Juncos. Derek Courtney added our first Snow Goose and Long-tailed Duck which were found during count week. A full report can be found at mountain-eeraudubon.org.

Each of the citizen scientists who volunteered their Saturday to take part in the Christmas Bird Count makes an enormous contribution to conservation in our area. Audubon and other organizations use data collected in this longest-running wildlife census to assess the health of bird populations and help guide conservation action.

From feeder-watchers and field observers to count compilers and regional editors, everyone who takes part in the Christmas Bird Count does it for the love of birds and the excitement of friendly competition -- and with the knowledge that their efforts are making a difference for science and bird conservation.

President's Message

As I write this, there is about seven inches of snow on the ground up here in the highlands of Preston County. It's hard to believe that spring is just around the corner. And springtime is when a birder's thoughts turn to the spectacle and magic of spring migration, with its colorful warblers, tanagers, orioles, and other beautiful, but less colorful birds. Not all of us are serious, hardcore birders, or we may not be comfortable identifying birds, or we may not know where to go to look for birds, so we may not get out to witness spring migration as often as we'd like. Well, as in past years, Mountaineer Audubon has a solution to that.

We offer many weekend bird outings during the spring, visiting most of the birding "hotspots" in the area, led by experienced and dedicated birders. Our leaders are happy to show participants the wonderful birds we come across, help beginners learn about bird identification, and just share the experience of being out on a beautiful spring morning. Please remember that our leaders volunteer their time to lead these outings, so join them to make their efforts worthwhile. Anyone interested in participating in one of our spring outings will find a comprehensive list of our bird walks in this newsletter, along with sites to be visited, leaders, and contact information. We'll look forward to seeing many of you this spring, and together we can go out and find some wonderful birds.

Another great resource offered by Mountaineer Audubon is its spring and fall programs. These programs feature speakers who give informative talks, usually accompanied by slides, about all aspects of birds and nature, all of which should be of interest to anyone with a membership in the National Audubon Society and/or Mountaineer Audubon. Unfortunately, attendance at these programs has been dwindling each year, to the point where there are only about ten to fifteen attendees at each program. If this trend continues, we may have to consider doing away with our programs altogether. To help us avoid that situation, please consider attending one or more of our programs this spring. A list of the programs we're offering is included in this newsletter. And of course, information about programs and all the other activities and events hosted by Mountaineer Audubon can be found on our website at www.mountaineeraudubon.org.

David Daniels

Spring 2015 Programs

Both programs will take place at the Spruce Street United Methodist Church, 348 Spruce Street, in downtown Morgantown, which is next door to the Farmers Market Pavilion. Parking at 50 cents per hour is available in the adjacent city lots. Enter at rear of the church.

Tuesday March 10, 7:00 pm

From the Amazon to the Pacific: an Ecuador Adventure

In November and December 2014, Terry Bronson and Nancy Nelson celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary with the trip of a lifetime to Ecuador. From the colonial Spanish architecture of the capital, Quito, to the biological diversity of the Amazon rainforest, to the stunning views and amazing bird life of the Andes Mountains, and to the unique flora and fauna of the volcanic Galapagos Islands, Ecuador is an experience not to be missed. Join Terry as he presents some of the highlights of their tour.

Friday April 17 Annual Meeting and Banquet

Dr. Edwin D. Michael, Professor Emeritus, WVU, will present a program on West Virginia timber wolves and mountain lions at the annual Audubon banquet. Dr. Michael recently published a book "The Last Appalachian Wolf" and, while conducting research for this historical novel, he discovered several interesting historical accounts of timber wolves in West Virginia. Also, Dr. Michael recently wrote the Afterword for a book "West Virginia Mountain Lions" and while researching recent history of mountain lions in North America he discovered numerous events pertinent to the future of these large predators in West Virginia.

Dr. Michael will discuss the recent urbanization of large predators and examine the likelihood of wolves and mountain lions becoming reestablished in West Virginia. He will invite the audience to evaluate the benefits and problems associated with such reestablishments.

Annual Meeting will be from 6-6:30 pm, followed by cocktails and social mixing from 6:30 to 7pm. At 7 pm we'll start dinner, followed by our program. Registration information is on page 7 of the newsletter.

SPRING 2015 BIRD WALKS

All walks are free and will be on Saturdays except as noted. They will only be canceled for extremely inclement weather. Bring binoculars and dress appropriately for the weather. Included are a few sponsored by other area organizations. For more information, contact Terry Bronson, bronsonwv@gmail.com or 304-225-0999.

Mar. 21—Waterfowl trip, Cheat Lake. 8:00 am at Ruby and Ketchy's Restaurant on Route 857 east of Cheat Lake. 7:00 am if you'd like breakfast first. Leader: Derek Courtney.

Mar. 27 (Friday)—Evening Woodcock/Owl walk, West Virginia Botanic Garden, Morgantown. 7:30 pm at lower parking lot on Tyrone Road. Leader: Terry Bronson. Sponsored by WV Botanic Garden.

Apr. 4—Pleasant Creek Wildlife Management Area, Barbour County. 8:00 am at first parking lot on Upper Pleasant Creek Road west of Routes 119/250. For those coming from Morgantown, meet at 7:00 am at Mountaineer Mall near the water tower. Leaders: Joe Hildreth and Terry Bronson.

Apr. 11—Friendship Hill National Historic Site, Geneva, PA. 7:30 am at side of Kroger Store in Suncrest Town Center or 8:00 am at trail parking lot along entrance road to Friendship Hill. Leader: Terry Bronson

Apr. 18—Prickett's Fort State Park, Fairmont. 8:00 am at rail trail parking lot next to fort. Leader: Sue Olcott. Sponsored by WV DNR and the Park.

Apr. 21 (Tuesday)—Core Arboretum, Morgantown. 7:30 am at Arboretum parking lot on Monongahela Boulevard. Leader: Terry Bronson or guest leader. Sponsored by Arboretum.

Apr. 25—West Virginia Botanic Garden, Morgantown. 7:30 am at lower parking lot on Tyrone Road. Leader: Terry Bronson. Sponsored by Garden.

Apr. 25—Prickett's Fort State Park, Fairmont. 8:00 am at rail trail parking lot next to fort. Leader: Sue Olcott. Sponsored by WV DNR and the Park.

Apr. 28 (Tuesday)—Core Arboretum, Morgantown. 7:30 am at Arboretum parking lot on Monongahela Boulevard. Leader: John Boback. Sponsored by Arboretum.

May 2—Prickett's Fort State Park, Fairmont. 8:00 am at rail trail parking lot next to fort. Leader: Sue Olcott. Sponsored by WV DNR and the Park.

May 5 (Tuesday)—Core Arboretum, Morgantown. 7:30 am at Arboretum parking lot on Monongahela Boulevard. Leader: Terry Bronson or guest leader. Sponsored by Arboretum.

May 9—Cooper's Rock State Forest, Morgantown Migratory Bird Day. 7:30 am at Raven Rock Trail parking lot. Leaders: Terry Bronson and Derek Courtney. Sponsored by Avian Conservation Center of Appalachia.

May 12 (Tuesday)—Core Arboretum, Morgantown. 7:30 am at Arboretum parking lot on Monongahela Boulevard. Leader: Terry Bronson or guest leader. Sponsored by Arboretum.

May 16—Dorsey's Knob Park, Morgantown. 8:00 am at mosaic wall parking area. Leader: John Boback.

May 19 (Tuesday)—Pleasant Creek Wildlife Management Area, Barbour County. 8:00 am at first parking lot on Upper Pleasant Creek Road west of Routes 119/250. For those coming from Morgantown, meet at 7:00 am at Mountaineer Mall near the water tower. Leaders: Joe Hildreth and Terry Bronson.

May 23—Rehe Wildlife Management Area, Arthurdale. 8:00 am at Decker's Creek Trail parking lot where trail crosses Route 92 just south of Reedsville. Leader: David Daniels.

VULTURE ROOSTS: NOT IN MY BACK YARD

Edwin D. Michael

To most amateur ornithologists, the turkey vulture is a common nondescript bird that generates little interest. Typically seen soaring high above the earth, they exhibit few intriguing traits that attract the curiosity of observers. Remarkable as it may be, the uneventful and apparently effortless riding of thermals and air currents draws little additional attention. Unfortunately, these highly-specialized birds are usually observed at such long distances that their individual behaviors are seldom witnessed. Courtship, nesting, and brood rearing have been witnessed by only a few dedicated professional ornithologists.

One exception to turkey vultures' secretive behavior involves their tendency to congregate at roosts. It is not unusual for 100 or more individuals to share a single roost site. On those occasions it is possible for both amateur and professional ornithologists to witness individual interactions, if only for a few hours at dusk and dawn.

On the outskirts of Morgantown, West Virginia, one such turkey vulture roost is located. This roost has been in continual use for over 20 years and most likely dates even farther back in time. I became aware of this particular roost when in 2002 I moved into the adjacent small subdivision. I noticed dozens of turkey vultures soaring over my house during several evenings in late summer, but it was not until the leaves had fallen from the trees that I "discovered" the roost. Surveys made 1-2 hours before darkness revealed at least 190 vultures. I continued to monitor the roost for the next 6 years and recorded 210-230 birds each fall. The roosting population was smaller in spring, when numbers were typically between 150 and 170. Censuses were more difficult to conduct when leaves hid the roost trees. However, counts of birds coming to roost throughout summer months indicated that fewer than 100 congregated there each night. Most likely, adults were occupied with nesting and brood rearing at widely dispersed sites and remained at or near their nest sites, which are typically on cliffs, dead trees, large snags, abandoned crow nests, or inside vacant buildings. The increase in numbers at the roost during October would represent those adults that had congregated there in the spring, along with young of the year and subadults that did not breed.

Roosting behavior varied slightly from night to night at the Morgantown roost, but became quite predictable after 4-5 years of observation. Beginning 1-2 hours prior to sundown, individual birds would steadily converge on the site from all compass directions. Vultures would typically sail directly into the roost trees and alight smoothly on a branch capable of supporting their weight. Only when wind speeds exceeded 7-8 miles per hour was their approach modified. Under those conditions they would circle several hundred feet above the roost before landing into the wind. Such an approach provided a much more controlled landing than a crosswind or downwind landing.

Early arrivals each evening seemed to choose limbs 3-5 inches in diameter. Thus, they were neither at the outer reaches of limbs nor near the main trunk. Considerable jostling became evident after 100-120 birds had arrived. Latecomers often collided with individuals sitting on limbs and forced them from their chosen sites. The majority of birds were widely spaced throughout the treetops, although many appeared to be within a few inches of another individual. The effects of this closeness became more obvious as the last of the roost birds arrived. No sounds were evident other than those occurring when wings struck limbs or other birds. Some vultures would not return until darkness approached, making it difficult to obtain an accurate count.

The Morgantown roost site is centered within a 140-yard wide strip of mature hardwoods, bordered on the east by the subdivision of 32 single-family residences and on the west by two single houses. At its upper end the strip connects to a wooded tract of 160 acres with no houses. A secondary road is located 200 yards to the south. The roost site is located 45 yards from the nearest yard and 90 yards from the nearest house.

Although vultures roosted in 4-5 individual hardwood trees, the majority concentrated in the branches of a large northern red oak and an even larger shagbark hickory. The red oak had a diameter of 38 inches and a height of 80 feet, while the hickory was 40 inches with a height of 95 feet. Both had multiple branches in their canopy, with sturdy limbs for perching. As many as 110 vultures congregated nightly in the hickory.

The roost site was situated on an east-facing slope, resulting in early morning sunlight striking the roosting vultures shortly after the sun rose over Chestnut Ridge. Of equal importance to the vultures was Cheat Lake, located one-half mile east of the

roost. Most vultures departing the roost launched themselves into the air, flapped their wings a couple times, and sailed directly “down” towards the lake. There, they encountered thermals that enabled them to gain the altitude necessary to disperse into the surrounding countryside. Based on the directions from which birds returned each evening it appeared they spent the daytime hours at all compass directions from the roost.

Vulture departures from the roost site extended over a 1-3 hour period, depending on air temperature and precipitation. During those days when air temperatures were below forty degrees, the birds spent considerably more time in the trees. On those mornings when temperatures were below 30 degrees F some birds remained in the trees until noon. Spreading their wings to intercept the sun’s rays, they eventually warmed enough to begin the day’s feeding flights. Of course, the sun’s rays also created well-developed thermals as air temperatures increased over the lake.

Turkey vultures were not year-round residents of the roost, having migrated before winter. In most years the vultures began using the roost around March 1 and by mid-November many had departed for warmer climates. Inclement weather during March and/or November caused the vultures to alter their roosting behavior, often arriving 4-5 hours before sundown. Snow, freezing rain, strong winds, and low temperatures would force them to abandon the leafless roost trees. On such evenings, the vultures would initially land in the hardwood trees, but as darkness settled over the area they would move to nearby conifer trees. Although conifers may provide better shelter during inclement weather, the dense foliage makes it difficult for birds to find a suitable limb for perching.

The concentration of roosting vultures throughout the growing season has had a major impact on the forest floor beneath the trees. An area approximately 24 yards by 30 yards is nearly devoid of herbaceous plants and even more striking is the absence of fallen leaves. The ground surface is comprised of partially decomposed leaf litter, sprinkled liberally with white droppings (feces) and black feathers. Fresh bird feces are high in nitrogen, which most likely result in the leaf decomposition and lack of herbaceous plants. Ground cover density of herbaceous plants outside the roost area averages 70-80%, whereas under the roost it averages less than 5%.

As fascinating as this vulture concentration was to numerous amateur ornithologists, a few of

the residents did not share their enthusiasm. This was especially true for the residents whose house was closest to the roost. The original resident in that particular house tolerated the vultures, and the second resident showed interest and curiosity about their behavior. The current resident of that house has been less cordial. Part of the dissatisfaction is due to the presence of a few black vultures that use the roost. I counted 3 in 2007, 6 in 2009, and 13 in 2013. The black vultures began perching on the roof of their house and on the cover of their hot tub in 2008. Whether it was the odor of droppings (which I personally never found unacceptable), the specter of black vultures perching on their roof, pecking at the hot tub cover, or just the presence of hundreds of large black birds congregating a short distance from their yard (think Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Birds*), the current residents were not happy.

Those particular residents contacted the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources (WVDNR) and the USDA/APHIS/Animal Damage Control office to request assistance. WVDNR biologists came in 2011 and fired pyrotechnics to successfully disperse the vultures. They also recommended that the residents harass the birds by banging pans, firing shell crackers, or setting off firecrackers if the birds should return.

Although the vultures abandoned the roost in spring 2011, a large number of vultures did indeed return that fall. Again the residents responded. One day I heard the distinctive roar of a large chain saw, followed a short time later by the sound of a large tree crashing to the ground. A subsequent investigation revealed the large hickory that had previously attracted the majority of the birds each night was no longer standing. That drastic action and continued use of loud noises drove the vultures from the roost for that entire autumn. Small numbers returned the following spring, but dispersal techniques were again successful. Fewer than 60 birds used the roost in 2012. It is unknown where the vultures have roosted since being dispersed.

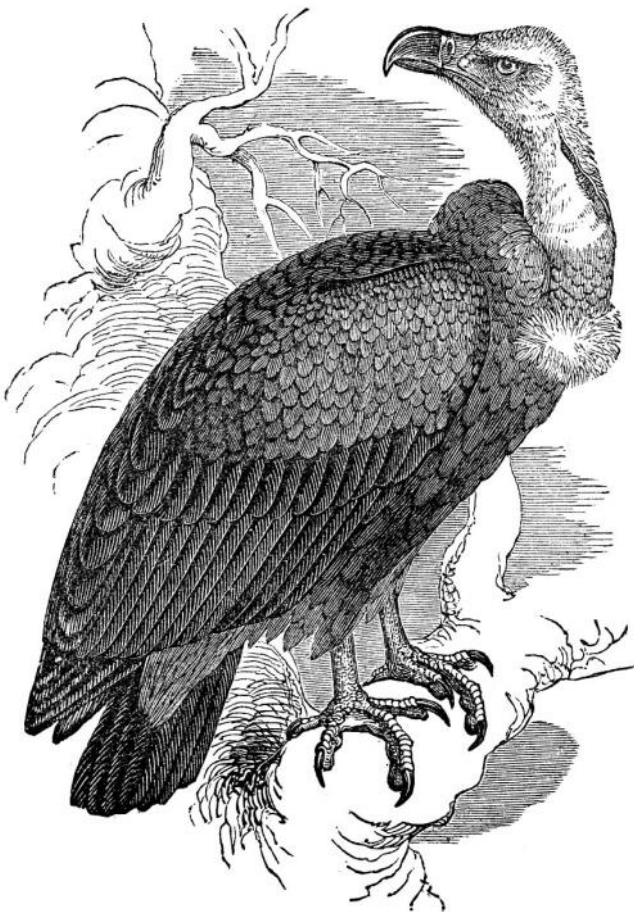
Roost fidelity is apparently quite strong in vultures and numbers at the roost reached 170 birds in the spring of 2013. However, with the absence of their favorite roost tree, the vultures were forced to use smaller nearby trees.

On the evening of April 28, 2013, I was alarmed to hear firecrackers exploding near the roost. Almost instantly, the sky was swirling with disturbed vultures and I counted 167 turkey vultures and 13 black vultures. No birds used the roost during the first two weeks of May. Six vultures were

seen circling the roost in late May, but the site had once again been abandoned. Only time will tell if the site has been permanently abandoned.

Vultures are fully protected by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and it is illegal to kill one or apply potential lethal techniques. However, harassment to disperse vultures from a roost is legal in most states if the concentration of birds is deemed unhealthy or intolerable. Technical assistance is available from the federal Animal Damage Control office and a state permit may be required.

Some ornithologists have expressed concerns about dispersing vultures during spring immediately prior to nesting. Certain critical facets of courtship occur at the roost and disruption of pair bonding could potentially impact nesting success and population numbers. The role of these high-flying aerialists in removing animal carcasses from the countryside is well understood and appreciated. These master recyclers should not be harassed unless conditions become intolerable for nearby human residents.



Blue Jean Ball on March 7 to Benefit Green Space in Morgantown

The West Virginia Land Trust is hosting a fundraising event, the Blue Jean Ball on March 7 to benefit a green space project in Morgantown. Mountaineer Audubon has joined with WVLT in co-sponsoring this event. Such a project should therefore be of interest to our members.

The West Virginia Land Trust has partnered with the Mon River Trails Conservancy to raise awareness and funds to support the land protection of public recreational green space in the Mon Valley. In addition to benefitting our current local residents, green space bolsters our economy by boosting the housing market, increasing tourism, and attracting new businesses.

Guests are invited to dress up in their favorite blue jeans for a fun evening enjoying a southern meal, an open bar, dancing to a live band, and bidding on silent auction items. Proceeds from this event will benefit a green space project in Morgantown.

Tickets to attend are available for \$50 per person. Mountaineer Audubon has reserved several places.

Anyone interested in attending should contact Katherine Payne at paynekw@gmail.com regarding payment and any additional information. Katherine will advise WVLT who the attendees are and the tickets will be available at the door. So don't delay, because we need to let WVLT know who is coming as soon as possible.

Saturday, March 7, 2015

Benton Grove Bed and Banquet, just off the Goshen Road exit of I-79, near Morgantown

Live music by: Total Meltdown

For more information and to register, go to www.wvlandtrust.org or call 304-413-0945

Join our Facebook page. Just search for Mountaineer Audubon and click on Like.

We will post bird news, reminders for outings and programs and interesting items about local environmental programs.



Wolf bounty hunter with pelts

Mountaineer Audubon Annual Meeting and Banquet
Friday April 17
Spruce Street United Methodist Church, 348 Spruce Street, Morgantown

Join us from 6-6:30 pm for the annual meeting. Cocktails 6:30-7 pm, followed by dinner at 7 pm. The program will follow. There is no charge to attend the program for anyone not having the dinner. The banquet will be \$25 per person.

Dr. Edwin D. Michael, Professor Emeritus, WVU, will present a program on West Virginia timber wolves and mountain lions. Dr. Michael recently published a book “The Last Appalachian Wolf” and, while conducting research for this historical novel, he discovered several interesting historical accounts of timber wolves in West Virginia. Also, Dr. Michael recently wrote the Afterword for a book “West Virginia Mountain Lions” and while researching recent history of mountain lions in North America he discovered numerous events pertinent to the future of these large predators in West Virginia.

Dr. Michael will discuss the recent urbanization of large predators and examine the likelihood of wolves and mountain lions becoming reestablished in West Virginia. He will invite the audience to evaluate the benefits and problems associated with such reestablishments.

Mountaineer Audubon Annual Banquet reservation

To reserve your spot, send this form along with a check payable to Mountaineer Audubon no later than April 10 to David Daniels, 1150 West Herring Road, Masontown, WV 26542

Name (s) _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip code _____

Number attending _____ x\$25 per person= \$ _____ enclosed.

Entrees will include both a meat dish and vegetarian choice. Anyone with special dietary needs should contact David Daniels at (304)276-7127 or email at cotinga747@yahoo.com.

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Chapter Code: C2ZY510Z

(Do not use this form if you are currently a member of National Audubon)

Join Mountaineer Audubon and receive all the benefits of Chapter membership. For \$5 more also receive a National Audubon membership and receive the AUDUBON magazine. Mark your choice below.

_____ \$15 – Mountaineer Audubon Membership Only

_____ \$20 – Mountaineer & National Audubon Membership

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip code: _____

Phone (optional): _____

Email: _____

Mountaineer Audubon does not share email addresses with anyone. Your email will be added to the Mountaineer Audubon listserv to receive Chapter updates on trips, bird sightings, etc. If you do not want to receive these emails, please check here: _____

Clip and mail this form with your check made payable to Mountaineer Audubon

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Thank you for your support!

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