



Northern Neck Audubon Society members gather on the Great Wicomico River for an annual Christmas Bird Count. Photo by Betsy Washington

# For the birds:

*a hobby to improve your health and lift your mood*

by Jackie Nunnery

**Once an activity overlooked by many, birdwatching has become a popular pastime due to the pandemic. While embraced by many during the earliest stages of quarantining since it was one of the few activities available, there are also benefits to getting out and communing with nature—specifically its most accessible and visible wildlife—birds.**

## *A walk in the woods*

If spending time in a gym sounds like drudgery, consider the health benefits of walking. “Exercise should feel like a gift, not a chore,” said Dr. Edward Phillips, assistant professor of physical medicine and rehabilitation at Harvard Medical School in a 2020 Harvard Health newsletter. “Stop calling it exercise and start referring to it as physical activity, and a whole new world of options will open up.”

One of the greatest benefits to living in

this region of Virginia is access to trails that include places birds also love to call home. The wooded trails, rivers and shorelines are great walks for humans, but they also appeal to different species of birds who summer or winter here. Check out any of the area Natural Area Preserves—Dameron Marsh, Hughlett Point, Bush Mill or Hickory Hollow—for the best opportunities to observe birds in the varying habitats. Virginia is also a stop on the Atlantic Flyway, which stretches from Greenland to the Caribbean. Each spring and fall, all manner of birds stop along the coast to

rest, feed or breed as they migrate.

All this variety may have you feeling clueless where to start, but it’s simple, said Kevin Howe with the Northern Neck Audubon Society (NNAS). “You need to just get outside and start looking.”

Perhaps the greatest benefit to birdwatching is a mental one. A growing scientific field called ecotherapy has highlighted a connection between spending time in nature and a resulting reduction in stress, anxiety and depression.

A 2015 study published in the Proceedings

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—Kevin Howe

of the National Academy of Sciences showed that walking for 90 minutes in a natural setting lowered activity in the region of the brain that is active during rumination, those repetitive, negative thoughts typically produced in times of stress, anxiety or depression.

The cause and effect relationship isn't quite clear, but it's believed that being surrounded by pleasing sights and sounds gives you something to focus on other than your thoughts. In other words, getting out of your head breaks the negative feedback loop.

Being out in nature is one thing, but what is it about birds specifically? Howe said he remembered back to his first class in biology when he was an economics major. “My professor, a very famous ornithologist said birds were the ‘ambassadors of nature’ and they get us outside and slow us down so we unplug, observe, get quiet and get back to nature. Birds are perfect to do that because they all have their unique set of shapes, colors, plumage, behaviors and voices. That course, which was not just about birds, had me change my major and then pursue graduate degrees in field biology.”

### *Birds of a feather*

While solitary time in nature has its benefits, birdwatching with others allows you to socialize and learn from experienced birders. One of the best

ways to do that locally is through the NNAS.

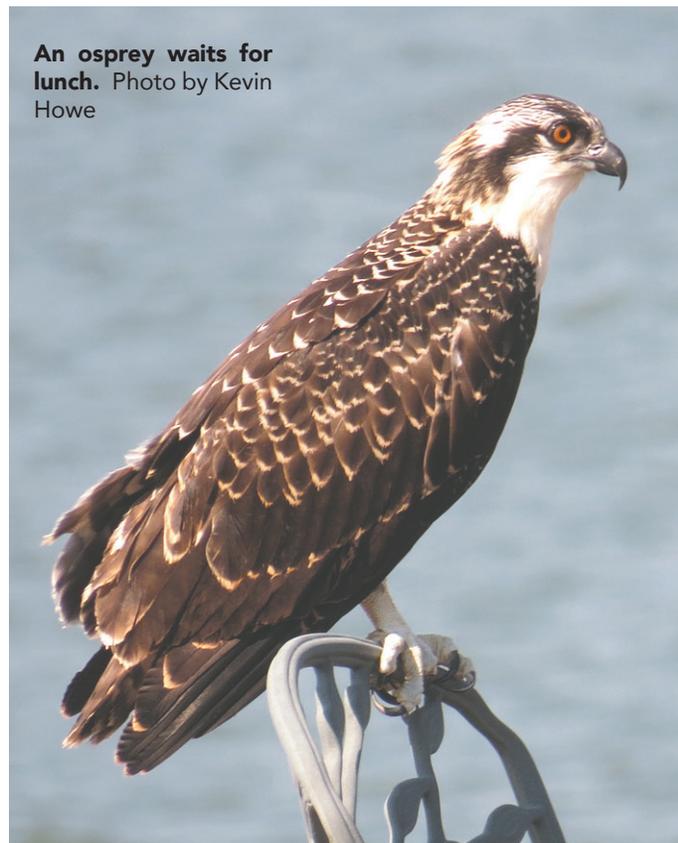
During the days before COVID-19, the group met twice a month for bird walks. These walks would take place at a variety of habitats like Hughlett Point, Fones Cliff or Kendale Farm in Essex County.

“There’s a great mix,” Howe said of the people who attend and they are “generous with their knowledge.” Howe also said the walks help build observational skills, “learning to see what’s around you.”

Other educational events still take place, though they are currently virtual. One upcoming zoom presentation is by Virginia Master Naturalist Jeff Wright about photographing birds.

One of the most enduring events the group participates in is the annual Great Backyard Bird Count, held for four days each February. A partnership among The Cornell Lab of Ornithology, the National Audubon Society and Birds Canada, this community science project collects wild bird data in almost real-time to provide a greater understanding of the global bird population.

**An osprey waits for lunch.** Photo by Kevin Howe



**Cardinals are easy to identify.** Photo by Jackie Nunnery



The annual Northern Neck Audubon Society New Year's Day Walk at Hickory Hollow provides an opportunity to learn from others. Photo by Betsy Washington

### *Backyard birding basics*

Getting started with birdwatching is as simple as installing a feeder or two. The type of feeder and feed determine the types of birds that will stop by. If variety is what you're after, tube feeders do a good job of keeping seed dry and allow for perching birds of all sizes. There are also countless seed mixes out there and each will typically list which birds are attracted to the mix. As you progress, you may decide to focus on feeding specific types of birds, like hummingbirds with nectar feeders. Regardless, just make sure to clean your feeders frequently to avoid spreading disease.

Adding access to water for drinking and bathing will make your feeders even more popular. Better yet, plant bushes and shrubs for perching and hiding, and you've made a neat little habitat that is sure to draw in the birds and make for great observation.

Of course, like any good hobby, there's the stuff needed to enjoy it.

There are books. Howe suggests *The Sibley Field Guide to Birds of Eastern North America* by David Sibley and for kids, *Backyard Birds* by Karen Notling.

A good pair of binoculars will allow you to see your new feathered friends up close. The NNNAS offers a buying guide at <https://northernneckaudubon.com/resources>.

[squarespace.com/resources](https://northernneckaudubon.com/resources).

Fields guides are key for identifying your feathered friends and there are apps for that. Merlin, a free app from The Cornell Lab takes you through the identification process step-by-step. With its companion app, ebird, you can record the birds you see. Audubon is another free app that helps identify and record sightings. Both apps include calls, so eventually you'll know them by ear.

### *Watching nature unfold*

With time, you'll become a keen observer of detail, identifying birds on more than just color, you'll recognize distinctive markings. You'll begin to notice behavioral differences like which birds like to perch and which like to climb. You'll understand which birds you're likely to see at your feeder and which ones require a deeper walk into the woods.

You'll also be able to mark the passage of seasons, knowing which birds are just passing through and anticipating the arrivals of those which have spent the winter in warmer climates. You'll experience the excitement of identifying a new bird and the satisfaction of knowing you've created a place that has invited nature in.

**With time and the right food, the ruby throated hummingbird will return to the feeder every year.** Photo by Jackie Nunery



American oyster catcher on Bluff Point. Photo by Kevin Howe

