



Rivanna Master Naturalists

February 2026 Newsletter

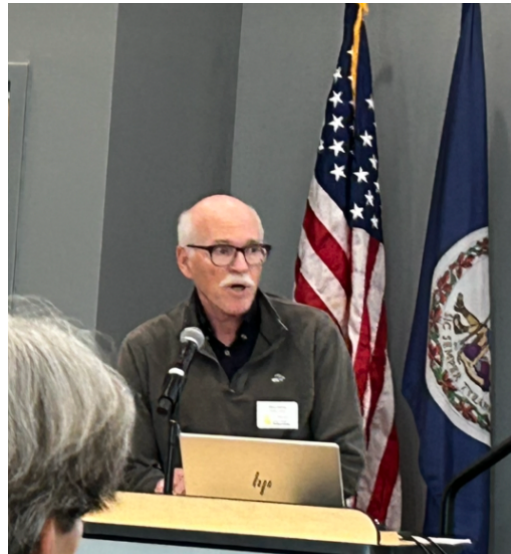
Upcoming 2026 topics

The RMN Chapter Annual Meeting was held Saturday, February 14th, at 2:00 PM at Piedmont Virginia Community College. About 40-45 members attended from multiple class years. All committees reported on their activities.

Photos from the Annual Meeting

The RMN Chapter Annual Meeting is scheduled for Saturday, February 14th, at 2:00 PM, and will take place at Piedmont Virginia Community College. All members are invited to attend, as the meeting will include a review of the exciting and important contributions made over the past year.

During the meeting, members will have the opportunity to elect our incoming President-elect, Stacy Agar.



BIRD COUNTS

Last year my personal challenge was to see how many species I could observe. I planned 4-days of birding in nine counties and had 84 species during the 2025 Great Backyard Bird Count. My goal will be more modest this year due to other scheduled events. Here are some of the birds I've been seeing in our Charlottesville backyard.

My 2026 count was 69 species. 9 counties and City of Charlottesville with one rare vagrant life bird, the red-flanked bluetail.

RMN Joann Dalley

From Joann Dalley's Great Big Bird Count 2026





female purple finch, male Eastern bluebird, ruby-crowned kinglet, hermit thrush.



Male Eastern bluebird



female purple finch, male Eastern bluebird, ruby-crowned kinglet, hermit thrush.



female purple finch, male Eastern bluebird, ruby-crowned kinglet, hermit thrush.

OUTREACH 2026



Outreach Education Opportunities

Come one come all! We need volunteers for upcoming education events:

CHIPP Initiative, Friday February 27th from 3-6pm at City Space in downtown Charlottesville

Educate about invasive plant removal and what to plant instead, and network with our partners. Come for half of the time or all of it! To volunteer, contact Beth Kuhn at bethkuhnrnm@gmail.com

Botanical Garden of the Piedmont EcoFair, Saturday April 18, time not yet announced

Educate about native plants and pollinators using our "Who Are the Pollinators?" display, and children's butterfly and wildflower activities. If interested, please contact Nalini Ayya, who will be in touch when we have exact times. ayya1960@gmail.com

Kid*Vention, Saturday April 25th, from 9:30-1pm at the Key Recreation Center in Charlottesville

Introduce kids and their families to the Owls of Virginia! This is always a lively and well-attended event in the heart of Charlottesville. To volunteer for a shift (9-11am or 11-1pm) contact Jocelyn Prostko at jocelyn.prostko@gmail.com

Monthly tabling at IX Market on a variety of wildlife topics, starting in April or May. Exact dates will be available soon. If interested, contact Holly Hintz, who will keep you informed about dates and topics. hollyhg1@yahoo.com

The next Outreach Committee meeting will be Monday February 23rd on Zoom, to work on planning for our spring tabling events. If you have interest in working with our committee, please contact Beth for the link.

Let Your Curiosity Take Flight

If you're tired of waddling around like a penguin, feeding birds, or identifying tracks, pull off your boots and have a listen to *The Science of Birds* by [Ivan Phillipsen](#), a professional birding guide and naturalist. It's a fun and engaging website, blog, and podcast for birders and naturalists at any level. As a novice, I'm finding it a wonderful way to expand my ornithological vocabulary and deepen my understanding of bird ecology and behavior.

A few episodes that got me hooked:

ü #128 (Jan. 18) – [Avian Navigation: How Birds Find Their Way](#)

Explains the internal genetic programs and celestial compasses and the astonishing ability to literally “see” the Earth’s magnetic field.

ü #127 (Jan. 3) – [What We Learned About Birds in 2025](#)

An annual review of research into bird behavior, evolution, and conservation.

ü Jan. 29, 2026 -- [Random Bird Thursday](#) – The Yellow-eyed Penguin (*Megadyptes antipodes*)

ü #126 (Dec. 3, 2025) – [Herring Gulls](#) (*Larus smithsonianus/argentatus*)

Includes their iconic seaside calls, clever foraging tricks and their fascinating evolutionary story.

Happy listening—and happy birding!

Ann Regn, Class of 2022

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Worth Repeating from January **A Season for Civic Attention!**

by RMN Anne Regn

The Virginia General Assembly (GA) convenes this week on January 14. Because 2026 is an even-numbered year, this will be a long, 60-day session during which thousands of bills will be introduced and considered before adjournment.

The GA maintains a robust [website](#) where you can watch live sessions of both the Senate of Virginia and the House of Delegates. Virginia’s [Legislative Information System](#) (LIS) is the central hub for tracking bills and committee meetings. You’ll also find links to historical information, the Code of Virginia, and the Virginia Administrative Code.

You may already receive alerts from organizations you support or follow advocacy updates on social media. Below are several reliable resources that make staying informed and participating on issues you care about easier than ever.

Two organizations taking the lead on data centers and related energy and environmental concerns are the Sierra Club and the Piedmont Environmental Council. The 2025 report, [Unconstrained Demand: Virginia Data Center Expansion and Its Impact](#), analyzes the rapid growth of data centers across the Commonwealth, detailing significant environmental, economic, and social impacts and recommending policy actions.

Hands down, the most comprehensive coordinated environmental advocacy effort in Virginia is the Virginia Conservation Network (VCN). This coalition of more than 160 environmental and conservation organizations collaborates to develop shared policy priorities (outlined in its [Common Agenda](#)) and provides extensive advocacy tools and resources.

Another valuable resource is the nonpartisan [Virginia Public Access Project](#) (VPAP), which organizes and clearly presents political and financial information. VPAP offers tools such as:

- Bill tracking and [bill searches by issue](#)

- Profiles of new legislators
- Lists of [legislative committees and assignments](#)

VPAP's graphics are especially user-friendly. On a single page, you can view a bill's status, vote margins, how each legislator voted, and how votes break down by party, gender, and region.

For nonpartisan reporting, consider subscribing to [Virginia Mercury](#), an independent, nonprofit news organization with no paywalls. It provides in-depth coverage of the environment, state government, health care, and other key issues.

Environmental organizations play a critical role—but their impact is strongest when legislators hear directly from constituents. Your voice matters, and engaging with these resources helps ensure it is informed and effective.

Questions: [Ann Regn](#), Class of 2022

Looking for a top-notch day of continuing education?

Registration opens in mid-December for the popular [Woods & Wildlife Conference](#), scheduled for February 28 at Germanna Community College's Daniel Technology Center in Culpeper. Pricing is \$55 per person or \$100 per couple and includes lunch and refreshments.

For over 20 years, this conference has featured timely information, practical "how-to" sessions, and personal contacts to help private woodland owners keep their woods, and the wildlife that live in them, healthy and productive. There are both plenary and concurrent sessions, with a variety of topics to appeal to landowners of any size tract and any experience level.

For those who don't mind a longer trip, a Woods & Wildlife Conference is also offered on February 21 on Virginia Tech's campus in Blacksburg. (Session topics will differ, but the format and pricing are the same.)

submitted by
Ellen R. Powell, Conservation Education Coordinator
Virginia Dept. of Forestry, 900 Natural Resources Dr., Ste. 800
Charlottesville, VA 22903

We live on a bluff overlooking Ruritan Lake. During the winter, when the leaves are down, the view is quite open and this year the lake is covered with 4-6 inches of ice. Yesterday, through a long telescope, I noticed a mound on the ice that seemed to be moving. Turns out it was a deer carcass covered with 4 or 5 vultures, unfortunately too far away for decent pictures. I took some anyway and then went off to do a few errands. When I came back an hour later the vultures were gone, but had been replaced by a Raven and 2 immature Bald Eagles. Given that their heads were about half white I guessed their ages at 3-4 years. The three of them seemed to get along quite well and probably finished up with full bellies. I checked the spot on the lake early this morning and nothing at all remained. I suspect that under cover of night coyotes toted away whatever remained. Anyway, I decided to review the rest of the visible shoreline and noticed a section of open water where the ice should have been solid. To my surprise a closer look revealed a beaver lodge that had not been there as recently as mid-December, the last time when the lake was ice free. The industrious little fuzzy critters had built a home about 20 feet across and 6 feet high without us noticing.

From RMN Dave Volin

FLUVANNA RIVANNA MASTER NATURALISTS

UPCMING PUBLIC EVENTS & ACTIVITIES

Second Grade Earth Day, which you note, is at Pleasant Grove Park on Friday April 24. We usually arrive at 8:30 and complete before 2:00 with 2 contingents of about 120 kids each and 50 or so

adults. There is about a 30-minute break in our activities between contingents, while the kids eat their lunch. Actual bus arrival and departure schedules are usually provided by the schools a few weeks before the event.

First Grade Earth Day is May 8 at Central Elementary from about 8:30 to 1:00.

Ag Day at Carrysbrook Elementary is April 15 from about 8:30 to 2.

Summer Library Program at FluCo Library every Tuesday in June and July from 10-11:30.

Further, there is the annual Fluvanna Fight Against Breast Cancer Hike/ Walk/ Run on October 24 from 10-12 also at Pleasant Grove Park.

First day of class



Happy students



Carol Long, field trip coordinator, with new class



Catherine Buck addressing the first day of class



What's Available in Winter

I try to do this column with what's actually available at the time of writing, this late January/early February has been challenging. I walked Pleasant Grove last week with the snow/sleet cover and the pickings were certainly slim.

Pine trees are one of the 4 'survival' food groups. Pine needle tea has 5 times the Vit. C than citrus. Crush a handful of pine needles (White Pine is the tastiest), put in a cup and cover with water (almost boiling). Let steep for a pleasant and healthy tea. This can be sweetened with Birch sap, more on that in a bit. The inner bark of Pine trees, the cambium layer, can be eaten raw or cooked like potato chips. I personally chew the bark and get all the nutrients out and then discard the bark.

All Birch trees are edible. The twigs and inner bark can be eaten, the sap can be boiled down to make syrup or used pure as a sweetener. Drinking too much sap is not good for you as it has a high sugar content. I have not tried this but I have read that Birch sawdust can be mixed with flour. The twigs and bark can also be made into a tea.

All of our Maples and the Boxelder can also be tapped for a quick sweetener or for making syrup. Their inner bark can be used the same as the above Birchs.

I walked to my favorite Persimmon tree and there were still a few mummified fruit on the branches. Persimmon fruit has such a high sugar content that our local Indigenous folks used it for fruit leather. These shriveled up fruits were probably still edible although I did not try them.

The Eastern Red Cedars were being overwhelmed by Robins and Squirrels who were eating the little blue seeds. If on your hunting/gathering foray you lucked upon some animal protein, these berries, when ground, make a good seasoning.

All the nut producing trees were bare, the Hackberry tree fruit have already been stripped by the birds, although there may have been some Walnuts under the snow. I found some Multiflora rose hips that could be used for a Vit. C rich tea.

This would be a very hard time to live directly off the land. That is why acorns, nuts and tubers were stored. Squash and plant leaves dried, meat jerkied and fat rendered. Hopefully you had a cattail swamp that wasn't completely frozen over. Living here before Wegmans, took a lot of planning and work to be able to make it through the winter.

No worries, in a month all this stuff will be melted and the spring ephemerals will be coming up !!

KESTREL BOX TRAINING—IVY CREEK

JAN. 29—THURSDAY—5:30PM—

PT 2 FEB. 21—SATURDAY—12:30PM

IVY CREEK EDUCATION BUILDING — LIVE

Sharing their expertise in kestrel box installation and monitoring, Lauria McShane from the Virginia Grassland Bird Initiative (VGBI) and Alan Williams from the Old Rag MN chapter plus others will teach us about American kestrel biology, habitat, and nesting periods, as well as strategies to meet the notable decline in grassland bird populations. This team will collaborate with RMN participants to establish a monitoring program, with Lauria overseeing protocols, landowner contracts, the Nestwatch App, and data collection methodology. This approach is modeled after grassroots citizen science efforts like the Black Bear Project...you become an educator as well as an enactor, working at various locations. *Good for CE and volunteer hours*

NOTE: You must be able to take both parts, Jan. 29 AND Feb. 21, to participate fully in the program, which will not be time-intensive.

Reserve your place or ask questions directly with RMN Prez Sherri at westcotefarm@yahoo.com or 310.614.7251 (text her first).



POSTING ANNOUNCEMENTS

ON THE RMNGooglegroups listserv

To post announcements, mention projects, and pass on information of interest to RMN members, please contact rivannamn.info@gmail.com.

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COME JOIN US AND SHARE YOUR ADVENTURES AND PHOTOS.

RMN **PRIVATE** Group - Rivanna Master Naturalists Private Group - Only RMNs can join and post. Join us to post your own pictures and see photos by others.

"Rivanna Master Naturalists Help" Page - This page is **OPEN TO THE PUBLIC** if they want to ask questions, see what we are doing, etc.

Rivanna Master Naturalists Public Page - Our public face to the world.

SEE SOME OF OUR POSTS FROM FACEBOOK BELOW

GOODLinks

Log In Your Volunteer Hours Click on BETTER IMPACT

Resources for Master Naturalists [Click Here](#)

Virginia Master Naturalist Webinars - Check out the available webinars at the VMN Webinar page for Continuing Education Credit

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Check out our website
www.vmn-rivanna.org

The Virginia Master Naturalist program is open to all, regardless of age, color, disability, gender, gender identity, gender expression, national origin, political affiliation, race, religion, sexual orientation, genetic information, veteran status, or any other basis protected by law. An equal opportunity/ affirmative action employer.



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