

Lower Neuse Bird Club

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Bird Walk – Lake Mattamuskeet NWR, then maybe Lake Phelps & Lake Pungo

by Les Coble

When: Saturday, February 6, 2021

Time: Meet at **7:00 AM** at the Bridge Pointe Hotel, downtown New Bern, **or** meet at the Beaufort County Rest Stop, 5514 US-17, Chocowinity, NC at **7:30 AM**, where the trip will officially begin.

Bring: A bag lunch, snacks and drinks, warm clothing (layers), and gear; especially your telescope.

After birding the impoundment at the entrance of Wildlife Drive and other areas at Lake Mattamuskeet NWR, and a lunch break, those wishing to do so can make this adventure full day by heading with us to bird into the afternoon, possibly toward Lake Phelps and Lake Pungo to look for **Sandhill Cranes** and Snow Geese. We will offer suggestions and recommendations based on what is being seen in the area.

Cellular: Les Coble (410)-829-5501

LNBC Membership Dues

by Christine Stoughton Root

The pandemic has had many organized groups somewhat disorganized for the past 1/2-year, and struggling with that club's goals and objectives for the next 1/2-year. For now, let's ignore the lack of LNBC meetings and ask the question a member of any organization must ask themselves when expected benefits are greatly reduced. Why should I join/re-join "X" Association? Your elected officials struggled with this, and learned some groups have reduced dues, while others kept the same renewal level with the defined goal that unused funds would allow increased donations to oft considered 501-3c groups. Increasing donations is the plan by your leadership. It will immeasurably help struggling environmental/bird related activities of those organizations and allow you, the member, to receive the Newsletter and emails of activities in which we can most safely participate. Dues cover our year of club activities, which start in September and continue through June.

Dues are \$15 per person. Checks should be made payable to LNBC. Please be sure to notify Christine of any changes to your contact information. Dues should be mailed to:

Christine Stoughton Root
458 Country Club Drive West
Arapahoe, NC 28510

[Please note updated
mailing address!](#)



Tundra Swans at Pungo
Lake

©Michael Cheves Feb. 2017

Lower Neuse Bird Club

Bird Walk – Roper Research Farm & Vermilion Stakeout

Jan. 9, 2021

by Les Coble

As four of us waited for others to arrive at the Chocowinity Rest Stop, the sun was just peeking through the trees on the horizon and illuminating trees along the walkway to the rest stop buildings. In the low light, a greyish bird was seen sitting with its back to us and seemed small for a Mockingbird. A quick glance by Les and Christine confirmed a **Shrike**. That was cause for excitement and the hope it would remain until others arrived.

We had just confirmed it was a Loggerhead Shrike when it dove into the nearby depression and disappeared. Then it reappeared, but was clearly carrying a mouse! In typical alternate name, the “Butcher Bird”, it impaled the mouse on a small limb and began a feast. They start with the head as that holds the most caloric and readily available nutrients. But more importantly, that confirmed it would be present for the remainder of the club members who were just arriving. What excitement to start the birding day. It was fun to hear the tales of members who have seen this bird in the southern U.S. and witnessed its hunting and feeding activity.



Bird Walk – Roper Research Farm & Vermilion Stakeout

Jan. 9, 2021

by Ronnie Hewlette

The caravan of six vehicles from the Rest-Area proceeded North along Hwy-171 to Jamesville, turning East to pass through Plymouth on the way to Roper, NC. Along the way, vehicles with SNOW on them were seen in the on-coming lanes with their windshields scraped clean for driving. Wow – snow! What does this day hold for us?

At the Vernon James Research Station, just outside of Roper, NC, the group is greeted by Ronnie and Kevin who got there a few minutes early. Sunny skies with light winds, but it's still COLD in the 30-32F temperatures with snow and ice on the grassy spots and wet mush on the bare ground. Quickly catching up, everyone joins in tracking down a House Wren along one of the ditches where some irrigation equipment stood. Seems like there were sparrows everywhere, as the group of 10 birders walked toward the back-fence line. The abundance of Song Sparrows and Savannah Sparrows showed us the great range of variability within species, while some got quick glimpses of a couple of Swamp Sparrows and a single Fox Sparrow. Christine spotted the Fox Sparrow, which is a great find, adding another sparrow to the list. Kestrels, a Sharp-shinned Hawk, Bald Eagles are counted as we return to the vehicles, but the most verbalized comments were regarding the astounding number of Eastern Meadowlarks that were in the fields around us. In the morning sun, their yellow breasts were aglow when they would be in a bare spot in the field, offering a clear view for us to see. We estimated a count of 75, but there were undoubtedly, double that number for all the birds we did not see in the thicker over. And they were singing!

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Bird Walk – Roper Research Farm & Vermilion Stakeout

Jan. 9, 2021

by Ronnie Hewlette, continued from Page 3

Moving along, Wade stopped us at a cattle-pen next to the road, specifically looking for a Palm Warbler in the mushy-mud around the barns. A large flock of Canada Geese were seen in the distance as we walked out toward the cattle pens, along with a couple of Bald Eagles in the nearby trees. The Palm Warbler was spotted behind the barn and again, later on, as it flew away to the opposite side of the barn. The fields extending beyond us are hosting Ring-billed Gulls on the ground – approximately 150 at this stop, but there will be many more, as we travel along.

Driving along the back road of the farm, past the catfish ponds (no longer used for raising catfish) Wade stopped to look at the ponds, climbing up into the bed of his truck. With his height, he could easily see over the raised, grassy dike, but alas, nothing other than a Great Blue Heron was discovered. I'll admit that I was happy to sit in the truck and watch Wade – at the moment, my fingers were a bit numb from the cold temps.

Continuing along to the next turn in the road, we encountered a multitude of Killdeer in the fields. Trying our best to make something unexpected out of them, we easily counted 25-30 birds across the field, in this one spot.

With the elimination of the catfish farming venture, the readily available food source has been reduced and the number of Bald Eagles is down from what has been there in past years, but we counted at least seven individuals during our morning tour.

Turning North, we continued to glass the fields, back to the tree line. A flock of 15 turkeys was spotted at the edge of the trees. At first, only their heads and upper bodies were seen above the rise in the field. Then, as they moved into the trees they, one by one, jumped up a few feet in flight, displaying beautiful rich colors of their tails in the morning sunlight, if only for an instant.

Then the amazing happened. Pipits! On the far side of the field, a flock of at least 150 American Pipits rose out of the field, circling just at treetop level, they broke into several groups that then glided back into the field's low grass again. What a sight to behold! We continued watching, driving around to the North end of the field, hoping they would come closer, but that was the best view we had.

One more stop in a roadside bushy area, before leaving the farm, turned up White-Throated Sparrows, Song Sparrows, and Savannah Sparrows. We played the call of a Lincoln's Sparrow, hoping to entice one into view if it was in this area. There was a moment when a bird popped out that had a different look, but it didn't hang around long enough to confirm an ID. As Les summed it up – *“That is simply another of thousands of sightings that escape every birder. Lincoln's are masters at getting out of sight. I simply was too surprised and did not get enough details to make a valid ID, having seen only about a dozen over 60 years with only 2 that were out in the open (in Alaska on breeding territory).”*



American Pipits are among the very few species of American songbirds that nest in both Arctic tundra and alpine meadows. Although they're found in the open and are not especially shy, these small birds can still be inconspicuous as they walk briskly through tundra or agricultural fields. They also forage along river and lake shores, much in the manner of a shorebird. If you don't live in the Arctic or above treeline, look for these birds in winter.

Photo ©Michael Cheves,
Jan. 2018, Union Point
Park

Text courtesy of
allaboutbirds.org

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Lower Neuse Bird Club

Bird Walk – Roper Research Farm & Vermilion Stakeout Jan. 9, 2021

by Ronnie Hewlette

After a stop at the Rest Area just East of Plymouth, we headed on over to Williamston, NC to the Vermilion Flycatcher Stakeout in search of this rare bird.

We had to do a little searching, as the available habitat included more than one spot in this general area. By splitting into two groups, we surveyed multiple areas, finding the bird near a horse barn at the end of Long Branch Trail, which is west of the main road into the property. This spectacular bird has been seen at this location since early December, 2020. Finding it again as a group was exciting!

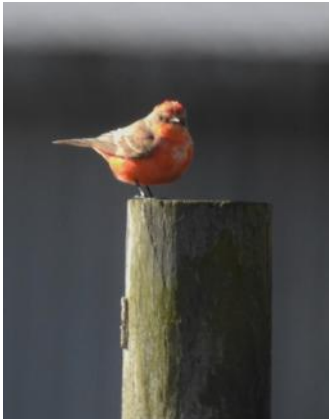
While searching for this bird, several other species were sighted, including Field Sparrows, Brown-headed Cowbirds, and a Cooper's Hawk, to name a few. The resident near this site came out to ask if we would sign a Guest book before leaving, which we gladly did. Hundreds of birders have come to see this bird, thanks to the available technology of communication and GPS and the graciousness of the property owner.

At this point, a few birders headed home, while a residual group set out for Aurora to check for a Golden Eagle reported at a site about three miles South, on Bay City Road. What we found was a field with carcasses of Feral Pigs scattered about, with a flock of 40-50 Turkey Vultures, 7 Bald Eagles (no Golden Eagle), Ring-billed Gulls and others in the area.

Apparently, someone has been shooting the pigs and leaving them where they fall. While we were there, several of the Feral Pigs were seen foraging in the field with no obvious concern for our presence. Interesting...

Again, the group split up and four birders made a run over to Florence Road in Pamlico County in search of the Western Kingbird that was first reported on the Pamlico Christmas Bird Count by Christine, and subsequently seen a few days ago by Les. The sun was getting low by the time we got to the correct address and after about half an hour, we concluded that the Western Kingbird was not going to show up.

We have had a great day of birding while picking up the Vermilion Flycatcher as a life bird for several. That's a good day in my book!



Vermilion Flycatcher
©Ronnie Hewlette



Left: Feral Pigs on Bay City Road
Right: Turkey Vultures feeding on pig carcass
Photos ©Ronnie Hewlette

Roper Farm & Vermilion Stakeout Checklist – Jan. 9, 2021

Compiled by Ronnie Hewlette

#	Species	#	Species	#	Species
1	Canada Goose	20	Vermilion Flycatcher	38	American Pipit
2	Ruddy Duck	21	Loggerhead Shrike	39	American Goldfinch
3	Wild Turkey	22	Blue Jay	40	Chipping Sparrow
4	Rock Pigeon (Feral Pigeon)	23	American Crow	41	Field Sparrow
5	Mourning Dove	24	Tree Swallow	42	Savannah Sparrow
6	Killdeer	25	Carolina Chickadee	43	Fox Sparrow
7	Ring-billed Gull	26	Tufted Titmouse	44	Song Sparrow
8	Great Blue Heron	27	White-breasted Nuthatch	45	Swamp Sparrow
9	Turkey Vulture	28	Brown-headed Nuthatch	46	White-throated Sparrow
10	Bald Eagle	29	House Wren	47	Eastern Meadowlark
11	Northern Harrier	30	Winter Wren	48	Red-winged Blackbird
12	Sharp-shinned Hawk	31	Carolina Wren	49	Brown-headed Cowbird
13	Cooper's Hawk	32	Ruby-crowned Kinglet	50	Common Grackle
14	Red-shouldered Hawk	33	Eastern Bluebird	51	Palm Warbler
15	Red-tailed Hawk	34	American Robin	52	Pine Warbler
16	Northern Flicker	35	Brown Thrasher	53	Yellow-rumped Warbler
17	Pileated Woodpecker	36	Northern Mockingbird	54	Northern Cardinal
18	American Kestrel	37	European Starling	55	House Sparrow
19	Eastern Phoebe				



Vermilion Stakeout, Martin County, NC
©Ronnie Hewlette

An Appreciation of Kestrels

by Melissa Moore

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American kestrel *Falco sparverius*

What to Look and Listen For

Because the kestrel is smaller and less stocky than a merlin and sits more erect than passerine (songbird) species of similar size, it's hard to mistake it for anything else. Its distinguishing features in flight are its small size, longish tail, and pointed wings. The hovering behavior is a dead giveaway for identifying this species, as is the bobbing of its tail when it perches on utility wires along the roadside or in a tree at the edge of a field. Close up, the male's slate blue wings, black mustache, and rufous back and tail make him more brilliantly colored than the female; her reddish-brown plumage is barred with black.

Their vocal repertoire consists of variations on three main vocalizations and combinations thereof: the *klee* or the *killy*, the whine, and the chitter. The one you are most likely to hear is the *klee* or the *killy*, a rapid series of three to six notes emitted by excited or stressed birds.

In New Hampshire, we're encouraged to remove bird feeders by April 1 and keep them in storage until December. If left hanging, bears find them irresistible, and chances are good that bird-feeder mayhem will follow. When the feeders come down, I head for the hay meadow. Starting in mid-April, and all through the following months, I'm scanning the skies for the American kestrel.

Their preferred habitat is right outside my door. I'm surrounded by acres of hay fields. Each field is outlined by stone walls with tall trees at regular intervals. The combination of grassland and high perches is a kestrel favorite. I typically hear the American kestrels well before I see them. Their *klee, klee, klee* sound announces their presence.

The American kestrel, a diurnal raptor, is fun to observe. Small in comparison with other raptors, they are members of the falcon family. Here in New Hampshire, their population is declining due to habitat loss.

Steve Wheeler, retired New Hampshire Fish and Game wildlife biologist, says, "Female kestrels lay eggs in a tree cavity that has been previously excavated by other birds. They do not build their own nests. Today, due to the rapid pace of development, almost all natural tree cavities are gone. They're a thing of the past. Nest boxes, then, provide about the only substitute if a pair are going to contribute to the population."

Wheeler installed a kestrel nest box on my property six years ago. It was ignored for the first two years. But since then three generations of fledglings have successfully been raised at this site. Two eggs produced two fledglings in 2016. Five eggs yielded five fledglings in 2017. In 2018, four fledglings resulted from four eggs. I was looking forward to the June 2019 generation with rising excitement. On observation day, my hopes were dashed. "Two cold and dirty eggs," Wheeler said. "Probably failure."

Everything had pointed to a successful breeding season. Male kestrels typically arrive first the breeding ground. At my location, their textbook behavior fueled my optimism. One mid-afternoon in April, I observed the male perched on a branch in close proximity to the nest box. His slate blue wing color and rusty topside caught my eye. The reddish-brown female arrived a week later. Over the next few days, I observed the pair move together from tree to tree. First one took flight, and then shortly after the other followed. Clearly they were courting, and this would be their territory.

Kestrels are acrobatic in flight and vocal, especially if a young fledgling is learning to fly and begging for food by chasing after the adult. The kestrel's markings are reminiscent of an early decade when facial hair was in-style. Both male and female kestrels have black vertical bars on their faces. From the side, the first bar looks like a mustache. The second mark is their sideburns. Both sexes have false eyes at the back of their heads. These anterior black spots help deter predators.

My original nesting box was about 15 feet off the ground, facing southeast with a 3-inch entrance hole. In mid-June, Steve Wheeler makes his rounds to monitor each box he has placed. Over the years he has established quite a network of nest boxes.

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An Appreciation of Kestrels

by Melissa Moore, Continued from Page 6

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In 2019, while my box produced no young, at other sites he found females incubating a full clutch of five eggs. Once a nest box is adopted, the female's occupancy runs long. The incubation period averages 29 days, and the nestling phase is approximately another month.

I doubt I'll ever discover the answer to why the female abandoned the two eggs she laid in my nest box. Did she consume prey with a fatal dose of rodenticides? Did she have an accident in flight that prohibited her return to the nest box? I logged my sad news into Cornell's Nest Watch site. I am new to reporting on citizen science networks like NestWatch and eBird. Now that I've discovered them, I update often with bird sightings and other avian information.

Even though I missed the antics of the young fledglings in flight, I continued to learn more about kestrels. The male stayed all summer and into the fall. I observed him hover hunting over fields, balancing on fence wires, and perching in tall treetops. In late August, as the barn swallows were tending their young, they mobbed the kestrel to drive him away. This happened many times per day. First I would hear the kestrel, and then a sharper chorus of swallows would fill the air with their alarm call. As I tilted my head skyward, I observed a swarm of swallows diving and circling, forcing the kestrel out of their territory. I'd seen this mobbing behavior before with crows and hawks. It only makes sense that the swift barn swallows would use this strategy to protect their young.

Three miles from my home, Steve Wheeler has installed a more modern kestrel nest box. He favors it since it can be lowered more easily for monitoring. At my old box, a tall ladder was required to get a glimpse of the interior. The new box down the road is surrounded by similar habitat with open farm fields and tall trees for perches. It does offer a nearly 360-degree view of one of New Hampshire's panoramic vistas. Plus, a number of utility wires crisscross the area, providing perches the kestrels enjoy. Is a nest box with a view a type of house-envy common among kestrels? I can only hope another year of kestrel watching will end on a more promising note.

Addendum: In 2020, work on a stone wall below the nest box discouraged its use. Instead, the kestrels nested in the hayloft of our barn. Sadly, the six eggs were abandoned. Still, kestrels hung around throughout the summer, so we are optimistic that they will nest in our field again this spring, but this time in a new, pole-mounted box.

Melissa Moore is a freelance writer, historian, retired digital-media librarian, and citizen scientist. She volunteers with New Hampshire Audubon on citizen science projects, such as the Backyard Winter Bird Survey.

When and Where to Look

The American kestrel is the most widespread small raptor in North America. Attracted to some human-modified habitats, such as pastures and parkland, they are often found near areas of human activity, including some heavily developed urban areas, but you can readily see them in desert habitats and even boreal forest clearings. In spring they will breed just about anywhere in the Americas where they can find suitable nesting cavities located close enough to a good foraging habitat with open patches covered by vegetation.

In winter you will see them in roughly the southern half of the continent. Kestrels especially prefer to winter in southwestern Texas and southern Florida, but they'll head even farther south to Mexico and Central America, the Caribbean, and South America. Some of the best places to see kestrels in the fall are at the major migration lookouts, such as Cape May, New Jersey; Hawk Mountain Sanctuary, Pennsylvania, and the various bird observatories on the West Coast, such as the Golden Gate Raptor Observatory, near San Francisco, California.



American Kestrel at the quarry,
Jan. 2019
©Michael Cheves

Lower Neuse Bird Club



Welcome New Members!

LNBC welcomes newest members Sandra (Sandy) Parker and Andrew Parker of New Bern, NC. Warm welcome to both of our newest members!
andrewparker (at) suddenlink (dot) net, or
Sandraparker2 (at) suddenlink (dot) net

Photo Gallery – December 2020-January 2021



Normal scene at my feeder this week – I had a high count of **27** Purple Finches!
©Michael Cheves Jan. 28, 2021



Western Kingbird – Christmas Bird Count **rarity** for Pamlico County!
©Dan Kendrick, Dec. 16, 2020



Northern Harrier photos
©Christine Stoughton-Root

