



Valley Views

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President's Note

By Michael Sullivan, PVAS President

The well-known author, journalist, and naturalist Hal Borland wrote that "No winter lasts forever, no spring skips its turn."

These words provide some solace in January 2018 as we experience a cold start to winter (Brrr), and we become more fully aware of mounting threats to the environment (Grrr). The threats are serious, and include climate change, habitat loss, deregulation of environmental safeguards, offshore exploration for oil, the shrinkage of national monuments, and other assaults to the natural world. The solace comes from the realization that dark clouds pass, people and organizations continue to be actively engaged in conservation, and the pendulum is bound to swing back in a positive manner that is more respectful of our fragile yet resilient planet.

Our parent organization, the National Audubon Society, does an excellent job of informing us about environmental issues and protecting both people and wildlife. Their advocacy makes a difference in policy debates at the national level. PVAS does its job too through education and action. Our programs provide indoor and outdoor opportunities to learn more about nature, the environment, and stewardship. We actively protect wildlife and important habitat at our nature preserves, on land that is managed under our Grassland Birds Initiative, and through the actions of the Monarch Alliance.

Could we be doing more? I think so. Our natural environment needs additional protection. Open spaces and habitat are threatened by development pressure across the Eastern Panhandle and Washington County. Our mission at PVAS is *People dedicated to preserving, restoring and enjoying the natural world through education and action*. Getting actively involved to protect the things that are important to us can be both gratifying and worthwhile.

Letting our elected officials know how we feel about conservation is one form of action. And, if one wants to roll up their sleeves, there are always many projects at our preserves for volunteers that ensure that the habitats entrusted to PVAS remains cared for and accessible. Our voices and our efforts are important.

Director's Special Report

By Kristin Alexander, PVAS Executive Director

We are very sad to announce that Bridget Tinsley will be leaving PVAS to start a new job and to be closer to her family in Oregon. Her last day was January 19th.

Bridget has accepted a job with the Oregon State Parks and Recreation Department as a natural resource specialist for the mountain region. She will be moving to Bend, Oregon where her family also lives. Bridget spent her childhood summers exploring the state parks that she will now be stewarding. We wish her all the best in this next chapter of her career. Oregon State Parks is very lucky to have her!



We will miss Bridget terribly here at PVAS. She's done a phenomenal job spearheading the land management at all of our preserves, coordinating the 4th Grade Watershed program, organizing our native plant sale, leading the charge on the Chimney Swift tower project, organizing the advocacy forum, and supporting the Grassland Birds Initiative. Through these efforts she has been doing public presentations including TV and radio interviews, coordinating volunteer days, and leading guided walks -- and has proven to be an incredible asset to PVAS, and a resource to the community.

We will be advertising her position by the time this newsletter goes to press, so if you know someone who would be able to fill Bridget's shoes please put them in touch with me! If you would like to wish Bridget well I will be happy to forward her any e-mails or notes. I know we will all miss her.

We have reached 50% of our \$50,000 goal for our Annual Appeal!

This fund drive supports the educational programs, nature preserves, and conservation initiatives of PVAS.

THANK YOU to those who have donated thus far. If you've not yet given, it's not too late!

The appeal continues through March 31. You can give online at <http://www.potomacaudubon.org/support> or you can send a check to PVAS, PO Box 578, Shepherdstown WV 25443.

Thank you for your contributions! We truly appreciate (and rely upon) your support.

Potomac Valley Audubon Society is people dedicated to preserving, restoring, and enjoying the natural world through education and action.

Winter Visitor: The Yellow-bellied Sapsucker

By Wil Hershberger

During the winter months, our feeders and woodlands are enriched by the presence of Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers. They can be attracted to your yard using suet feeders, as long as there is enough woodland habitat nearby in which to roost and forage when not at the feeder. This is a species of woodpecker with a taste for sap and insects. Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers are famous for their “sap wells,” which they drill in nearly perfect horizontal lines around the trunks of trees. Tulip trees (*Liriodendron tulipifera*) are a favorite target for these woodpeckers. Also, in pines especially, some sap wells can get rather large over time and become rectangular, as the sapsuckers continuously visit and enlarge the wells so there is a steady supply of flowing sap. Over time, trees can become girdled by these wells, eventually killing the tree. When the sap is running, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker wells are visited by other bird species, including Ruby-throated Hummingbirds and kinglets. These additional visitors are after both the sap and the insects that are attracted to the sap.

Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers are handsome birds decked out in blacks and whites like other woodpeckers, but with a bright white bar down the edge of the folded wing. This marking alone can be diagnostic from a distance. Both sexes of sapsuckers have a red forehead and crown. Males also sport a red throat patch. Adult sapsuckers have a lemon-yellow wash to the breast and stomach feathers. When viewed from behind, Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers almost disappear, blending remarkably well with the colors and textures of tree bark. Young birds are more subtly marked, having a dingy appearance. This species spends most of the morning hours looking for food then rests in the afternoon. In exceptionally cold weather, they will forage throughout the daylight hours.

During the winter months, Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers will give “waa” calls, more commonly referred to as mew calls (<http://macaulaylibrary.org/audio/77257>), which can be the first indication that this species is in the area. A quiet morning walk in a woodland in December or January is sure to be accompanied by these quiet, querulous calls.



Photos: Above, and lower left, female Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers ©Wil Hershberger

Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers drum during the breeding season to defend a territory and to attract a mate. Females also drum. The drumming of this species is characteristic and easily identified. The bird taps on a wooden substrate, such as a branch or loose bark, with an irregular, doublet pattern that can be heard from a significant distance (<http://macaulaylibrary.org/audio/87149>). Breeding starts in April, with males drumming to set up their territories. Females arrive about a week later and seek out nesting sites. Apparently, this species will nest in the same tree, often the same nesting cavity used during the prior year. Males will do most of the nest cavity excavation. Females lay their 4-5 eggs directly on the exposed wood at the bottom of the cavity. Females will incubate the eggs for a little under two weeks. The nestlings are fed by both parents and fledge at around 27 days after hatching. Young are fed for only a few days post-fledging, after which they start to feed themselves on insects.

Preliminary data from the second Breeding Bird Atlas in West Virginia indicates Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers are increasing their breeding population in the highlands of the state. In light of the fact that a significant number of forest-breeding species are declining in West Virginia, this is indeed wonderful news. Unfortunately, Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers are among those species of birds most often involved in collisions with windows. It is estimated that nearly 1.3 billion birds are killed each year in the United States in collisions with windows. There are a number of products and DIY projects that can be used to reduce and perhaps eliminate these catastrophes. Here is a link for further information on making your windows safe for birds:

<https://www.allaboutbirds.org/glass-action-advances-in-the-science-of-making-windows-safer-for-birds/>

I hope that you will make an effort to get out into the woods this winter, or visit the highlands of our beautiful state this summer, to seek out this gorgeous woodpecker species with the distinctive doublet drumming and the equally distinctive, querulous mew call.

Birding News and Events

Hey, Birders: Keep Those Binoculars Handy

Those who love nature know well that it is cyclical. When it comes to birds, even the casual onlooker can note that the birdsong-filled breeding season of spring and summer gives way to the quieter migration season of fall and that the presence of birds seems less evident during winter. Winter and early spring are exciting times for birders, however, when the frenzy of activity around winter bird feeders gives way to the spring migration of warblers and other songbirds through and to our local area. PVAS offers opportunities to enjoy this special moment in the season cycle of bird life.

Great Backyard Bird Count: February 16-19

The Great Backyard Bird Count is one of the annual rituals of birders. From February 16-19, birders will schedule 15 minutes or more of their time to sit comfortably at home, watch, and count backyard birds. This popular citizen science event yields valuable data about the presence and change over time in bird populations in a local area. Participating is simple:

1. Register online at www.gbhc.birdcount.org.
2. Count birds for at least 15 minutes on one or more days, between February 16 and 19, 2018.
3. Enter your observation data on the GBBC website: www.gbhc.birdcount.org.

All ages and experience levels can participate in this event, and it provides an accessible introduction to citizen science. Participants can count birds in their backyards or find another location, such as a PVAS nature preserve.

The Great Backyard Bird Count is a collaborative effort of the Cornell Ornithology Lab and the National Audubon Society; it is one of several annual birding citizen science projects that PVAS supports. If you have questions regarding the Great Backyard Bird Count, or would like to share your observations or photos, contact Krista Hawley at adultprograms@potomacaudubon.org.

Birding 101: Celebrating 32 Years in April

With a solid 32 years under its belt, the Birding 101 class only grows better with age. Over the course of one month, with four classroom sessions held at the National Conservation Training Center and four field trips to various birding hotspots, you will experience birding like never before.

Wil Hershberger, Birding 101 instructor for 32 years, notes that the current group of instructors will keep participants on the edge of their seats in the classroom, listening to stories from over 70 years of combined birding experience. For the field trips, the class dons hiking boots and binoculars and heads out along streams and rivers, through forests and fields. With the help of the instructors, you will learn how to identify the Red-eyed Vireo or the Eastern Meadowlark or listen to the songs of the Ovenbird or Carolina Wren. Each field trip brings new possibilities. Birding 101 alumna Carol Winckler explains, "Each outing promises hope and excitement to discover a new bird to add to your growing life list."

Visit www.potomacaudubon.org for more information about Birding 101 or to register. Registration is limited to 24 participants and fills up quickly every year.

Check the PVAS calendar to find more birding events, including monthly, guided bird walks and the Ruth Ann Dean Memorial Birdathon, to be held in May 2018.



Birding News and Events

The Results Are In: Christmas Bird Count 2017-18

Submitted by Bob Dean, Compiler

Both the Charles Town and the Inwood Christmas Bird Counts this season had species totals slightly above the 28-year average since totals have been recorded.

The 37 Charles Town counters, afield on Dec. 16, recorded 78 species, including record numbers of Black Vultures (370) and Red-bellied Woodpeckers (123). The 4 Redheads (observed on only two prior counts) and 2 Double-crested Cormorants (observed on only three prior counts) tied the previous high counts for those species. Participants enjoyed around average seasonal temps and clear weather. Joette Borzik led a morning field trip to Claymont Mansion and an afternoon trip to Cool Spring Preserve. Both were well attended by birders who we hope will join future counts. They were able to tally 43 species, duly added to the count totals.

There were several uncommon seasonal occurrences that should be highlighted: Lynne Wiseman, Tess England, Bruni Haydl, and Diane Sylvester got 2 early Common Goldeneyes on the Potomac; Jane Vanderhook, Diana Mullis, and Ann and Ted Stanford got a Phoebe and a Red-breasted Nuthatch; Jenny Eaton, Cathy Purchis, and Beverly Gold got a House Wren (four previous counts) and 4 Redheads; Jaime Gregory and Rennie Selkirk got 3 Great-horned Owls and an Eastern Towhee; Nancy and Elliot Kirschbaum and Kimberly and Daniel Baldwin got 10 Common Grackles; Wade Snyder got 5 Wilson's Snipe; and your compiler saw a Palm Warbler (only one prior observation) feeding with a small group of Yellow-rumped Warblers along the Shenandoah just below Moulton Park. At the south end of John Rissler Rd., while I was watching 2 Killdeer on a small island, a Merlin flew from the far side of the river right over my head and then off to the west.

Later in the day Vickie Crites, Urath Gibson, Stephen Hall, and I got a Pied-billed Grebe in the raceway below Millville Dam (spotted by Urath), and 2 Double-crested Cormorants above the dam. While watching a flock of 28 Horned Larks along the west side of Cattail Run Road, I glanced to the east and spotted a large raptor perched in the top of a locust tree at the far end of an open corn stubble field. Vickie Crites and I watched the Peregrine Falcon preen for ten minutes.

Total species for the Inwood count, held on Jan. 3, was 70. The hot spot on this cold day (-3° F was the low near Jones Spring) was Lake Thomas on Martin Street in Martinsburg, a former limestone quarry that filled with water when the subtending aquifer was punctured by a blast. Steve Hartmann was keeping an eye on the diminishing area of open water and the abundant waterfowl utilizing it. As the "count week" period arrived, Steve started documenting the changing mix of species. He was able to add Pied-billed Grebe for count day as well as 3 count week species new for Inwood: Greater White-fronted Goose, Double-crested Cormorant, and a Northern Goshawk checking the local feeders. Two Buffleheads were also added to the count week list. Since the quarry lies within the sector traditionally surveyed by Lynne Wiseman, Tess England, Bruni Haydl, and Carol Del Colle, they were able to count the huge flock of Canada Geese, 7 Gadwalls, as well as Redhead, Ring-necked Duck, and Lesser Scaup (all third-timers), and Common Merganser and Ruddy Duck. For some sweet icing on that waterfowl cake, they got a Merlin later in the day. Nice haul!

Meanwhile, elsewhere in the circle some of the 20 participants were documenting other good birds. Cathy Purchis had 5 Wilson's Snipe and 4 Killdeer along an open limestone spring in Darkesville. Donna Graham and Rosemary Evans found a Gray Catbird (fifth showing) in the Tomahawk area. Stan and Josiah Corwin-Roach added 2 Eastern Towhees, 3 Hermit Thrushes, and 2 Field Sparrows - all good finds. Derek Hudgins, Charles Ziegenfus, Vickie Crites, and I got a few goodies in Back Creek Valley, including Eastern Screech-Owl, Barred Owl, Red-headed Woodpecker and American Pipit (fifth showing). Wil Hershberger had a Great Blue Heron, Great Horned Owl, and American Tree and Swamp Sparrows.

Though the CBC season has officially ended, the memories of a lot of good birds in wild and not so wild places will linger through the winter. Thanks to PVAS for its continued sponsorship of these two local Christmas Bird Counts.

Join ACFF for its 6th Annual Best of Fest February 10, 2018



Films, Music, and Merriment Return to the Weinberg Center for the Arts, Frederick, Maryland.

For detailed information, go to:

<http://conservationfilm.org/attend/acff-best-of-fest/>

PVAS Events

This Race Is for the Birds 2018: Same Awesome Race, Exciting New Venue

It is with much excitement that PVAS announces a new venue for This Race is for the Birds 2018: Broomgrass Farm in Gerrardstown, WV, has graciously opened up its community's natural playground for our 18th annual race.

Wild Goose Farm has been a welcoming host for the race during the past two years but, due to ongoing renovations on its historic barn, cannot host the race again this year. Fortunately, Ryan McCarthy and his neighbors at Broomgrass Farm have eagerly stepped up and generously offered to share their gem of a property.

The trails at Broomgrass Farm offer gorgeous views, leading runners through fields and woods, and along the beautiful Back Creek. This working organic farm is a trail runner's paradise, and PVAS is looking forward to sharing this course with all of you.

Race details will remain the same as in years past. We will offer a professionally timed 5K walk/run, a 10K run, and a kids' free fun run. The 5K and 10K will kick off at 9 a.m., and the kids' fun run will begin at 10:45 a.m. Race registration can be found at runsignup.com, and details are available on the race website, raceforthebirds.org.



Adult Programs Look to Warmer Days Ahead

While we potentially have a few more months of cold weather ahead, spring is definitely within reach. PVAS is gearing up for the warmer months, so dust off your hiking boots and join us on some late winter/early spring adventures.

Spring migration is just around the corner. We will be out there, binoculars in hand, at the preserves, local watering holes, fields and woods alike, eagerly awaiting the annual return of our spring migrants. Enjoy early mornings with fellow bird lovers on one of our many bird walks or bird from your own backyard during the 2018 Great Backyard Bird Count. This citizen science opportunity creates a real-time snapshot of where birds are. Visit our website calendar for information. Full details can also be found at: <http://www.birdsource.org/gbbc/whycount.html>.

Late winter is a great time to learn about trees, and prepare them for their upcoming growth season. PVAS is offering a few different opportunities for the 'tree hugger' in you, from the Winter Tree ID at Eidolon Nature Preserve to the "Save our Trees from Invasive Vines" Volunteer Day at Morgan's Grove Park.

Are you eager to get your hands in the dirt this spring? You will not want to miss James Dillon's Morgan County Program on "Design Considerations: Functionality of Plants in a Garden."

We are continually updating the calendar with new events, so please check the website regularly.

Volunteer Spotlight

Have You Met the Sylvesters?

Diane and Gary Sylvester are synonymous with "PVAS Volunteer." They show up to almost every volunteer opportunity and program. Is there a need for bush hogging, gravel spreading, or augering holes for fence posts or trees? Gary and Diane will be there with the tractor, ready to go. Has a tree fallen across a trail? Gary and Diane will take care of it. They even go to auctions seeking items that would benefit PVAS; over the years, they have donated mowers, trailers, chairs, ladders, AV systems, laminators, and drop down screens for AV presentations. And every time you enjoy a cup of coffee at a PVAS monthly lecture? The Sylvesters provided that, too.

All of our PVAS volunteers are great! If you know someone who deserves a shout out, please contact Kristin at Kristin@PotomacAudubon.org.



Family and Youth Programs

An Overview of Spring and Summer Youth Programs

As we look toward spring, PVAS will continue its mission to provide meaningful youth programs to all age groups.

For the very young, we offer **Wee Naturalists**. This is a program for 3- to 5-year-olds in which parents participate with their children in nature-based activities. What we learn at our parent's knee is what we learn to love, so PVAS is happy to host parents who want to share the outdoors with their children.

Participants drive as many as 90 minutes to attend Amy Moore's lessons on invasive plants, animal tracks, and other topics in our **Homeschool Program**. To challenge students to think outside the box, Amy has created two special lessons on sustainability, in which students measure their carbon footprints, learn about composting and saving water, and consider the subject of food choices - an increasingly important topic. Participants sample meatless options and then are challenged to reduce their meat consumption.

In the area of environmental conservation, PVAS will continue our **Watershed Program** in nine schools this spring. Over 1,000 students will participate in five different lessons on the importance of healthy watersheds. Each program culminates in a field trip to a local stream to test water chemistry and collect invertebrates. The latter activity always invokes some squeamishness, as students get to examine the critters they swim with. By understanding that the presence of these organisms indicates clean water, students can make a connection to the need to protect the environment. Happily, one fourth grade class from Berkeley County voted the watershed trip "best field trip!"

PVAS will continue to promote the love of nature this summer at our camps. Help share the joy and wonder of nature by having your young ones join PVAS for an upcoming program or one of our summer camp sessions.

Spring Break at the Library with PVAS

Spring break: a joy for students, an endless week for parents. What to do?

As in past years, PVAS will fill spring break with library programs to entertain students and give parents a break. From April 2-6, our instructors will present a different lesson about nature at each of the libraries in the area: Martinsburg, Shepherdstown, Harpers Ferry-Bolivar, Charles Town, North Berkeley in Falling Waters, and South Jefferson in Summit.

Participants will be issued a "Library Passport" at the first session and receive a stamp at the end of the activity. The next day, with a bit of travel, the student can attend a different lesson at another participating library. On one day, there will even be two lessons offered. Students with full passports will receive a prize at the end of the program. All our activities are nature based and involve a book reading and craft.

This community program is free for families and paid for by the Nora Roberts Foundation. Look for more details at your local library or in future editions of Heads-Up PVAS!

The Preserves

Nature in Focus

Stauffer's Marsh offers great wildlife viewing in the winter. Several migratory waterfowl depend upon Stauffer's Marsh as a refuge along their journey. Each visit to Stauffer's Marsh is a unique experience: the large pond freezes and thaws, and the snow dust on the trails accumulates and then melts away, revealing the tracks of Stauffer's four-legged residents.

Stauffer's Marsh is one of two PVAS nature preserves in Berkeley County. With an expansive wetland, riparian forests, a large pollinator meadow, and nearly 800 feet of water frontage along Back Creek, Stauffer's Marsh offers a large array of habitats in just 47.5 acres. Stauffer's Marsh and all the PVAS nature preserves are open to the public during daylight hours, 365 days a year.

If you have a photo from a PVAS nature preserve that you would like to share, please email Kristin@PotomacAudubon.org.



Stauffer's Marsh © Wil Hershberger

Camp Programs

The Benefits of Summer Camp

We are extremely excited about the 2018 camp season. PVAS will be expanding our camp program once again, by providing 7 weeks of camp at both Yankauer and Cool Spring Preserves from June 11- July 27.

Summer day camp is an extremely beneficial experience that PVAS is able to provide to youth in our area. We believe we have something extra special to offer that is different from other day camps, because our camps are centered on nature education, nature appreciation, and nature play. Summertime is an ideal time to get children outside in nature as much as possible, and our Audubon Discovery camp sessions allow children to do just that.

According to the American Camp Association (ACA), an organization that we value for staff training, professional development opportunities and camp resources, summer camp experiences provide five key lasting benefits for children. First, camp provides a nurturing environment that enhances social skills. Camp also gives children the chance to meet peers outside of school. At PVAS camps, many of our activities require campers to work together as a team and collaborate on ideas, thus building essential intrapersonal skills.

The ACA also reports that camp often supplements traditional education. Our camps have a great balance of play, experiential learning opportunities, and educational programming, all of which challenge campers to think, wonder and create. For example, at Survivor camp, a favorite activity on water purification begins by showing campers the many ways there are to purify water, and then challenging them to build their own water filtration system.

Next, camp promotes self-confidence and future academic growth. ACA independent research shows that parents and camp staff, as well as the campers themselves, report significant growth in several areas, including leadership, independence, social comfort, setting values, and decision making.

Camp also encourages a respect for and love of nature. Without camp, some children may not get outside much at all during their summer break. At our camps, children are completely immersed in nature and are “unplugged” from the technology-driven world. In past years, we have seen some campers overcome their fear of bugs, while others experience the joy of simply playing in the mud.

Finally, camp provides the opportunity to stay physically active. We can, without a doubt, attest to this. Last summer there were countless times parents reported that camp wore out their children completely, causing them to instantly fall asleep in the car on the way home. This is no surprise, as we program the day to be filled with energetic activities such as hikes, running games, and fort building.

Summer camp allows children to truly explore their sense of wonder and be a kid. If you know of any kids in our community that might be interested, encourage them to check out PVAS’s Audubon Discovery Camp. It is sure to make a summer to remember! Registration can be found on our website, and opens on March 1.



Coming Soon: The Summer Camp Scholarship Deadline

The PVAS Camp Scholarship Committee is looking ahead to the summer 2018 camp season. PVAS offers scholarships to our Audubon Discovery Day Camp (ages 4-12) as well as several wonderful sleep-away nature camps in West Virginia (ages 8-14). These excellent camp choices include the Burgundy Center for Wildlife Studies in Capon Bridge, Oglebay Institute Junior Nature Camp in Wheeling, and the West Virginia State Junior Conservation Camp at Cedar Lakes in Ripley.

The deadline for applications is April 6, 2018. The application form is short, but a brief letter or photo from each applicant (depending on the age) and a reference from a teacher or family friend are also required. If your family is interested or you know eligible youth and families, please share this information and help them apply. Details on camp dates and ages, as well as our scholarship application forms, can be downloaded at www.potomacaudubon.org/scholarships. There is a separate application for Audubon Discovery Camp sessions. Contact Ellen Murphy (ellen@potomacaudubon.org) for more information or if you have questions.

Scholarships are funded by the proceeds from our annual fall birdseed sale and from individual and community donors who want to send kids to camp.

Conservation

Top 5: Animal Tracks in Snow

Winter is a great time to try out your animal tracking skills, especially when there is snow on the ground. Here are five common winter animal tracks that you can look for at one of our preserves or even in your own backyard.

1. **Deer** tracks can be identified by their two distinct hooves. When deer walk, they place their hind foot in the same track as the front foot. This is called “registering,” and it helps the deer conserve energy when walking in the snow. If you see a series of deer tracks, they typically follow a zigzag pattern. In deep snow or mud, you may see two small circles behind the hoof prints. These are from the deer’s dew claws, which are located on the lower part of the leg.



2. **Squirrel** tracks are unique because, when squirrels hop, their large hind feet land in front of their smaller front feet. Interestingly, squirrels have four toes on their front feet while their larger hind feet have five. So look for two smaller handprints in back and two larger footprints in front. If you are able to follow a series of squirrel tracks, you may find that they end at the base of a tree.



3. **Fox** tracks look like four oval toe imprints in front of a chevron-shaped heel pad. Their tracks are easy to confuse with dog tracks, but there are a few key differences. For one thing, fox tracks tend to be narrower than dog tracks, which are slightly rounder. Like deer, fox register when they walk by placing their hind feet in the track created by the front feet. Dogs, however, do not register: they leave a much sloppier tracking pattern in which the tracks of the front and hind feet do not line up perfectly. Additionally, fox tracks tend to follow a straight line while dog tracks take a more random path.

4. **Raccoon** tracks are easy to spot, often along a stream or river. They have five toes on both their front and hind feet. Their front feet leave a track that is quite similar to the handprint of a baby.



5. Around your **bird** feeder, you are likely to find the tracks of common songbirds that have anisodactyl feet: three toes pointing forward and one long toe pointing backward. By observing the birds that visit your feeder and looking at the size of the tracks, you might be able to figure out exactly who made the prints. For example, chickadees will have much smaller tracks than robins. Another thing to look for is the tracking pattern. Many songbirds, such as juncos and sparrows, hop when they are on the ground, so you will find their prints in pairs. Game birds, such as turkeys, have three toes pointing forward and one short toe that point backwards. When the snow is deep, you can more easily see the print of the backwards-facing toe. Of the three front toes, the middle is the longest, making the track look like an arrow. This arrow track pattern points in the opposite direction that the turkey traveled.



Next time you are on a walk or hike, keep your eyes to the ground and see what you can find. Don't worry about the destination: just let the tracks guide you on your wondrous journey to better understand nature.

The PVAS Environmental Education and Stewardship Mission: How You Can Get Involved

PVAS members have an excellent opportunity to track issues of common interest by following posts and action alerts from the WV Environmental Council. The E-Council is a coalition of organizations with common interest in concerns about the environment in WV. The primary mission of the E-Council is to support legislation pertaining to environmental issues during the annual WV legislative session. Member organizations organize professional input on potential legislation during the session and mobilize lobbying days and other efforts among their members and supporters. They are the best resource for anyone interested in environmental issues in WV.

The PVAS board recommends that individuals subscribe for Action Alerts and legislative updates through the E-Council by signing up on their website, wvenvironmentalcouncil.org, at the “Receive Action Alerts” sign-up. This year, prospective issues include the MVP Pipeline and climate change impacts on Appalachian forests. Members can also follow legislation on the wvlegislature.gov site to track bills. Both organizations have Facebook pages and twitter accounts that also provide information about pending and passed legislation.

The coming weeks are a great time to get involved in advocacy. The WV legislative session began on January 17, 2018, and the E-Council’s lobbying day will be Tuesday, March 6, in Charleston.

Nature Notes: Wheel Bugs, the Sci-Fi Predators of the Garden

Did you know that ladybugs are not “true bugs” at all? They are actually beetles. True bugs, of the order *Hemiptera*, are a specific kind of insect with a piercing or sucking mouthpart. *Hemiptera* include insects such as cicadas, stink bugs, and aphids.



There are many species of *Hemiptera*, but one of the largest in North America can be found in your own backyard. The wheel bug (*Arilus cristatus*) is a kind of assassin bug. Like its cousin the kissing bug, the wheel bug has a sharp, syringe-like mouthpart, or proboscis. The proboscis folds inward and extends out to stab prey, injecting it with enzymes that create a buggy milkshake from the soft body parts inside the exoskeleton. The wheel bug then sucks up this liquid for its sustenance.

Wheel bugs get their name from the armor on their back, which resembles a buzz saw. Growing up to an inch and a half in length, they can become quite large. If agitated, they may use the proboscis in defense. According to some, the wound is ten times worse than a hornet sting. Don’t worry, though: wheel bugs are fairly docile and actually quite slow, flying more like a grasshopper than a bee.

These creatures are an important and helpful part of our ecosystem. They are top predators of the bug world and prey on many smaller insects that can be harmful to the environment and to crops. If you come upon one, consider yourself lucky. Their presence signifies a healthy food web, especially among the local insects. They glue their eggs on trees near to the ground in autumn. The eggs resemble a platter of sushi rolls arranged in a hexagon. Most of the eggs will be infected with a kind of parasite, however, and will not hatch properly. The ones that do will produce red colored nymphs in the spring.

Remember to keep an eye out for novel bugs when walking out in nature. You might find something new that’s stranger than science fiction!

Monarch Alliance Receives Grant

Congratulations to the Monarch Alliance for their receipt of a check for \$1200.00 from the Community Foundation of Washington County. This contribution represents a grant from the George Moore Fund for Wildlife Preservation.

The Monarch Alliance plans to spend the funds to convert four stormwater drainage ponds at Bester Elementary School in Hagerstown to monarch habitat, and to tie them together with a trail system.

JOIN PVAS TODAY!

ALL of your dues will stay here to support local PVAS efforts and help us grow! And here’s what you’ll get:

- Member discount to many PVAS programs and events.
- A subscription to *Valley Views*, the PVAS newsletter.
- Free or reduced admission to participating nature centers and/or their programs across the country.
- E-mail alerts about events and programs (upon request).
- An invitation to a PVAS Members annual gathering.
- Discounts to participating **local businesses**.

Details available at potomacaudubon.org/member

To become a local member, send in the form below and enclose a check for \$20 (\$15 for seniors and students). Make the check out to “PVAS.” This fee covers membership for everyone in your household for one year. For details, go to: <http://potomacaudubon.org/member>.

Membership Form

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: ____ Zip code: _____

Phone (optional): _____

E-mail: _____

To save postage costs, PVAS regularly sends its newsletter by e-mail. You can be assured that we do not share email addresses with anyone. If you would prefer to receive the newsletter by U.S. mail check here: ____.

Clip and mail this form to:

Membership Chair, PVAS

PO Box 578

Shepherdstown, WV 25443



If you’d rather join the National Audubon Society:

Some people prefer National Audubon Society membership, which includes a subscription to the Society’s Audubon magazine. To become a National member, go to the Society’s website at www.audubon.org and click on “join.” If you join National Audubon and reside in Berkeley, Jefferson or Morgan counties in West Virginia, or in Washington County Maryland, you will automatically become a member of PVAS and have access to our events, an e-mail copy of newsletter and e-mail alerts. However almost all of your dues payments will go to the National Audubon Society; only a small percentage will go to PVAS.



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The Potomac Valley Audubon Society meets at 7:00 p.m. on the second Wednesday of each month, September through April. Programs are free and open to the public. For additional information about PVAS or its programs and activities, please contact any of the board members listed here or see <http://www.potomacaudubon.org>. PVAS serves the Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia and neighboring Washington County, Maryland.

PVAS BOARD

PVAS Board meet-
 ings take place the
 first Thursday of
 the month (Sep-
 tember through
 June). Meetings
 are open to all
 PVAS members.
 Please contact
 the President or
 Vice President if
 you would like to
 attend.

PVAS Officers and Board Members (Year of term expiration in parentheses)

President: Michael Sullivan (2018).....msullivanwv@gmail.com
 Past President: Jane Vanderhook (2017).....janhook@frontiernet.net
 Vice President: Suzanne Offutt (2018).....suzanneoffutt@gmail.com
 Secretary: Diana Gaviria (2018)jpikester@comcast.net
 Treasurer: Dan Cogswell (2019).....daniel.cogswell@gmail.com
 Board Members-at-Large:

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 Don Campbell (2019)treehouseview@comcast.net
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