The Birds of the Greater Rockbridge County, Virginia Area

Vultures, Kites, Eagles, Hawks, and Falcons

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Accidental – A bird outside of its normal range (breeding or winter) or outside of its normal migration route
Rare – A bird that is within its normal breeding or over-wintering range or its normal migration route, but should not be expected to be seen in the area on a yearly basis
Unusual – A bird that is within its normal breeding or over-wintering range but is not reported on a regular basis in the county (1-5 sightings per year)
Common – A bird that is regularly seen within the area but may not be present in large numbers or may have a restricted distribution (Locally Common)
Abundant – A bird that is found in large numbers within the county but may have a restricted distribution (Locally Abundant)

Transient – A bird that is seen in the area during migration or as a wandering sub-adult
Year-round – A bird that is present in the area throughout the entire year and is usually a breeder
Summer breeder – A bird that migrates into the area and breeds during the summer
Winter migrant/resident – A bird that migrates into the area and over-winters and then leaves in the spring

Locations

BB = Brownsburg and Bustleburg area including Route 252
BQ = Barger's Quarry
BRP 1 = Blue Ridge Parkway between mileposts 28 and 45 (Route 56 and Route 60)
BRP 2 = Blue Ridge Parkway between mileposts 45 and 64 (Route 60 and the James River)
BRP AO = Blue Ridge Parkway and Apple Orchard Mountain (mileposts 76 to 78)
BS = Big Spring
CT = Chessie Trail
GP = Goshen Pass
KD = Kendal Retirement community
LEX = Lexington
LM = Lake Merriweather at Goshen Pass
LR = Lake Robertson
LT = Locher Tract
MF = McCormick's Farm
MR = Maury River
NM = North Mountain
OFRP = Old Farm Road Pond
PQ = Quarry at the Ponds
RB = Rockbridge Baths area
RC = Rockbridge County in general
SR = South River
WL = Willow Lake

Notes:
Cameron's Pond, which was located near the current Rockbridge County High School, drained naturally in 19??.

Womeldorf Farm ponds are located just outside of Lexington in the new, Pond's housing development.
Lake Robertson and Lake Merriweather were created after Murray published his account of the Birds of Rockbridge County.

Accipitriformes:

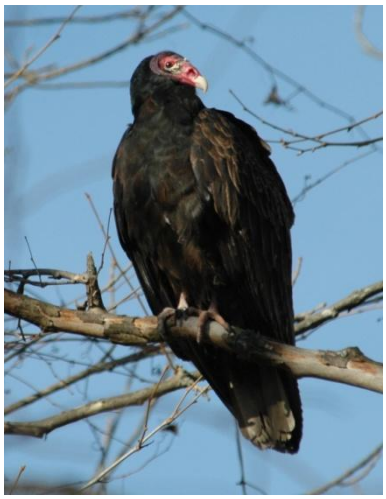
Vultures, Kites, Eagles, and Hawks

(For all photos: Vultures, Kites, Eagles, Hawks, and Falcons)

Black Vulture (*Coragyps atratus*):

Occurrence: Common, year-round resident of the county
Dates: Year-round
Location: RC
History: Individuals can be seen throughout the county. There are several large groupings with one near/in Lexington and one near Glasgow. Murray considered Black Vultures to be common and year-round residents. They have been reported in 68 of 84 CBC.
Status: Stable and large population and should be seen.
Photo: Kendal, 26 December 2008.
For additional photos: Black Vulture

Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*):



Occurrence: Common, year-round resident of the county.
Dates: Year-round
Location: RC
History: Individuals are seen throughout the year in the county and have been reported in 80 of 84 CBC. There is a large roost near/in Lexington. Murray considered Turkey Vultures to be year-round residents
Status: Stable and large population and should be seen on a regular basis.
Photos: Near Vesuvius, 22 December 2008.
For additional photos: Turkey Vulture

Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*):

Occurrence: Transient during spring and fall migration along rivers and creeks and larger ponds
Dates: April and May and September through October
Locations: WL, MF, MR, SR, Buffalo Creek, Kerrs Creek
History: Osprey are reported along the rivers and large creeks in the county and on the larger ponds/lakes during the spring and again in the fall. In the spring they are seen from the first week in April through mid-

May (eleven records between 4 April (2002) and 12 May (2003)). In the fall Osprey are seen from the end of August through December (eight records between 31 August (2006) and 20 December (1998)). Most of these sightings are along the Maury River near or in Goshen Pass or Alone Mill and along Kerr's Creek and Buffalo Creek. In addition, individuals have been reported at Willow Lake and McCormick's Farm and there is one record is from the South River near Nature Camp. There is one, unusual summer record of an Osprey on the Maury River at the Ben Salem Wayside on 30 July 2009. There are no records of Osprey on the CBC during the 84 years of counting. Murray reports 14 fall records ranging from early August to November and from 1 April to 15 May along the Maury River. Osprey are reported along the Blue Ridge Mountains during fall hawk migration (Rockfish Gap Hawk Watch reports an average of 145 individuals per year with the peak migration occurring from mid to late September).
Status: Common migrants/transients during the spring and fall, unlikely to be seen during other times of the year.
Photo: McCormick's Farm, 23 August 2009.
For additional photos: Osprey

Swallow-tailed Kite (*Elanoides forficatus*):

Occurrence: Accidental (two records for the county)
Dates: Summer; 10 – 31 Aug.
Location: RC, Oxford Church area
History: Four Swallow-tailed Kites were located in the Oxford Presbyterian Church area during August of 2012 (10 August through 31 August). The kites were seen circling and feeding over the fields in that area. A report on the four kites was submitted to VARCOM. The previous record, cited by Murray, reports that two kites were seen in the Brushy Hill area during the summer of 1890.
Status: Accidental and not expected in the area.
Photo: North Buffalo Rd and Blue Grass Trail, 22 August 2012.
For additional photos: Swallow-tailed Kite

Mississippi Kite (*Ictinia mississippiensis*):

Occurrence: Accidental (two records for the county)
Dates: 21 May and 19 September.
Location: MR, RC
History: On 19 September Vic Laubach and Peter Nebel loacated a Mississippi Kite with the Swallow-tailed Kites seen in the Oxford Church area. Their sighting has been submitted to VARCOM. Murray reports seeing a Mississippi Kite along the Maury River near the Lime Kiln Bridge on 21 May 1951.
Status: Accidental and not expected in the area.

Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*):

Occurrence: Year-round resident with the likelihood of one or two breeding pairs in the county
Dates: Year-round with most of the sightings in the fall and winter
Locations: LM, MR, WL

History: There have been a number of recent records of Bald Eagles in the area. There were two sightings along the James River at the Appalachian Trail Foot Bridge on 27 December 2003 and 11 February 2004 and at the Blue Ridge Parkway on 11 February 2004 (undoubtedly the same individual seen on that day at the AT bridge) and on 5 April 2005. Two individuals were reported along the Maury River near Alone Mill on 19 March 2006, a single individual was seen at the same location on 5 September 2006 and 1 October 2006. I photographed two, immature birds at Lake Merriweather on 23 January 2009, a pair of adults at Willow Lake on 9 January 2009, a single individual at the confluence of South River and the Maury River on 24 December 2010, and two adults in Rockbridge Baths and one adult and a juvenile at Lake Merriweather on 8 January 2011. Bald Eagles have been seen several times at Willow Lake and in the Fairfield area. In addition, two adult and one juvenile Bald Eagle were reported on the 2010 CBC and were seen again on 8 January in the Goshen Pass and Lake Merriweather area. During the spring of 2011, a nest was located along the Maury River near Rockbridge Baths. One eaglet was present in the nest in May, and it fledged later in the summer. This is the first confirmed nesting record of Bald Eagles in the county. Other eagles have been reported near Fairfield on 13 June 2004 and flying over the top of Apple Orchard Mountain on 23 April 2005. Bald Eagles have been reported on the CBC from 1992-1996, 2000, and 2003-2010. In 2004, 2005, 2006, and 2010 three individuals were reported in the CBC. Murray reports 10 records from various parts of the county between 1929 and 1950. Bald Eagles are reported along the Blue Ridge Mountains during fall hawk migration (Rockfish Gap Hawk Watch reports an average of 38 individuals per year).
Status: Uncommon year-round resident and could be seen at Lake Merriweather, Willow Lake, or flying along the Maury River.
Photos: Upper photograph at Willow Lake, 9 January 2009 (by Lucy Rowe); and lower photograph at South River, 24 December 2010.
For additional photos: Bald Eagle

Northern Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*):

Occurrence: Winter migrant/resident
Dates: December through March
Location: RC
History: There have been a few recent sightings in addition to the CBC sightings. Individuals were reported in the county on 9 and 10 March 2007, on 20 and 25 September 2010, and 22 October 2010 near Rockbridge Baths, on 31 January 2002 along the Chessie Trail, at Willow Lake on 22 December 2008, and several individuals were seen around the county during the late fall of 2010 with two of these individuals seen in the Brownsburg area. Harriers have been reported on 19 CBC with individuals reported from 2003 – 2008. Murray reports one sighting in May of 1945. Harriers are reported along the Blue Ridge Mountains during fall hawk migration (Rockfish Gap Hawk Watch reports an average of 40 individuals per year with the peak migration occurring from late September to mid-October).
Status: Uncommon winter migrant and is unlikely to be seen in the area.
Photo: Brownsburg area, 6 November 2010.
For additional photos: Northern Harrier

Sharp-shinned Hawk (*Accipiter striatus*):

Occurrence: Year-round resident
Dates: Year-round
Location: RC
History: Sharp-shinned Hawks are residents of the county although they are not present in large numbers. Sharp-shinned Hawks are seen more often in the winter and this may be due to northern migrants entering the area. Sharp-shinned Hawks are reported in 50 of the 84 CBC and have been reported every year since 1990. Murray considers them to be common and notes two nests found. Large numbers are reported along the Blue Ridge Mountains during fall hawk migration (Rockfish Gap Hawk Watch reports an average of 989 individuals per year with the peak migration occurring from early to mid-October).
Status: Year-round resident and breeder, not numerous and more commonly seen during the winter months
Photo: Lexington, 14 February 2009.
For additional photos: Sharp-shinned Hawk

Cooper's Hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*):

Occurrence: Year-round resident and breeder
Dates: Year-round with a majority of the sightings during the winter
Location: RC
History: Cooper's Hawks are residents of the county that are not present in large numbers. There are 14 recent records primarily from the Lexington area. A pair could be found on the back parts of Washington and Lee's campus during the 1990's, but no nest was located. More recently, a pair has been seen around the Kendall Retirement Community. Cooper's Hawks have been reported in 32 of 84 CBC. Murray considers Cooper's Hawks to be fairly common and reports one nest found. Cooper's Hawks are reported along the Blue Ridge Mountains during fall hawk migration (Rockfish Gap Hawk Watch reports an average of 162 individuals per year with the peak migration occurring in October and early November).
Status: Year-round resident and breeder but not numerous and could be seen in the county.
Photo: Harrisonburg, VA, 24 December 2011.
For additional photos: Cooper's Hawk

Northern Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*):

Occurrence: Accidental
Date: 5 November 2008
History: Alex Merritt found a Goshawk near Rockbridge Baths on 5 November 2008. This is the first record of this species in the county.
Status: Accidental and not expected.

Red-shouldered Hawk (*Buteo lineatus*):

Occurrence: Year-round resident and breeder
Dates: Year-round
Location: RC
History: There are 19 recent records of Red-shouldered Hawks in the area. A pair has been reported on a regular basis at Goshen Pass where the pair is likely nesting in the area west of the Swinging Bridge. During the winter of 2003-04 an individual was seen several times along Woods Creek and on the Kendall property in Lexington. An adult or pair can be seen around Kendal throughout the year. During the fall and winter of 2010, one juvenile and two adult Red-shouldered Hawks were seen in the Kendal area. Red-shouldered Hawks are reported on 41 or 88 CBC's with six individuals seen in 2001 and seven seen in 2007. Murray notes 40 records and one nest located in the county (near the present day Kendal development). Red-shouldered Hawks are reported along the Blue Ridge Mountains during fall hawk migration (Rockfish

Gap Hawk Watch reports an average of 31 individuals per year with the peak migration occurring in early November).
Status: Year-round resident and breeder but not numerous and could be seen in the county.
Photo: Lexington, 13 February 2010.
For additional photos: Red-shouldered Hawk

Broad-winged Hawk (*Buteo platypterus*):

Occurrence: Summer resident/breeder
Dates: April through September (earliest arrival 9 April 2009)
Locations: BRP 1, BRP 2, GP, NM, forested areas of RC
History: These are hawks of the forest and are often seen along forest roads. There are numerous recent records of Broad-winged Hawks in the area. They arrive early in April and are expected by the third week of April. They remain in the area until at least mid September (the latest record is 24 September 2009). Murray notes that Broad-winged Hawks are seen between April and November and are transients with a few summer residents. Large numbers are reported along the Blue Ridge Mountains during fall hawk migration (Rockfish Gap Hawk Watch reports an average of 7,716 individuals per year with the peak migration occurring from mid to late September. Although in 2010, an extraordinarily large Broad-winged migration occurred with 32,490 individuals counted and most passing by on three different days).
Status: Common summer resident and breeder and could be seen in the forests in the county.
Photo: Rockbridge County, 22 August 2012.
For additional photos: Broad-winged Hawk

Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*):

Occurrence: Year-round resident/breeder
Dates: Year-round
Location: RC
History: This is the most common hawk in the area and is a permanent resident. There are numerous recent records from around the county with sightings in every month. During the winter, the number of Red-tailed Hawks in the area increases due to an influx of individuals from northern areas. Red-tailed Hawks have been reported in 67 of the 84 CBC's with a high count of 46 individuals seen in 2004. Since 1999, an average of 28 Red-tails has been reported on the CBC. Murray notes that these hawks are common and nest in the area. He notes three nests found. Large numbers are reported along the Blue Ridge Mountains during fall hawk migration (Rockfish Gap Hawk Watch reports an average of 1,077 individuals per year with the peak migration occurring from late October to early November).

Status: Common year-round resident and breeder and should be seen in the county.
Photo: Left photo, Blue Ridge Parkway near mile post 28, 16 October 2010; right photo, near Lexington, 1 November 2009.
For additional photos: Red-tailed Hawk

Rough-legged Hawk (*Buteo lagopus*):

Occurrence: Winter transient and migrant
Dates: December through March
Locations: LR, northern RC
History: This is a rare hawk in the area with one record 7 January 1999. There are five reports of Rough-legged Hawks on the CBC (2011, 2008, 1993, 1980, 1976). During the winters of 2009-2010, 2010-2011, and 2011-2012, a Rough-legged Hawk was seen on a regular basis near Stuart's Draft. Murray reports one record on 6 December 1948 near Lexington.
Status: Rare and should not be expected to be seen in the county.
Photo: Near Stuart's Draft, 5 January 2012.
For additional photos: Rough-legged Hawk

Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*):

Occurrence: Winter migrant but transients/juveniles could be seen any time
Dates: December through February with one record in June
Locations: BRP 1, southern RC
History: There are five recent sightings of Golden Eagles in the area. Paul Cabe and Leigh Ann Beavers saw a juvenile above Nature Camp (Vesuvius area) on 3 February 2002. I saw an immature bird on 31 January 2004 and 2 February 2004 along the Blue Ridge Parkway near Mile Post 45, and one individual near Mile Post 28 (Nature Camp area) on 21 June 2005. Three reports of Golden Eagles are noted in the CBC with the most recent in 2004. Murray notes three sightings in the county in 1934 and 1945. A few Golden Eagles are reported along the Blue Ridge Mountains during fall hawk migration (Rockfish Gap Hawk Watch reports an average of 6 individuals per year).
Status: Rare and not be expected in the county.

Falconiformes:

Kestrels, Merlins, Peregrine Falcons

(For all photos: Vultures, Kites, Eagles, Hawks, and Falcons)

American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*):

Occurrence: Common, year-round resident/breeder
Dates: Year-round
Location: RC
History: Kestrels are open field birds and are most often seen on wires and fence posts along the open farm roads of the county. There are numerous recent records from around the county mainly in the late winter and spring (February through April). Kestrels have been reported in most months of the years and are likely breeding in the area. There is an obvious influx of birds in the winter months indicating that the area is a wintering area for northern birds. Kestrels have been reported in 75 CBC's with a peak of 21 individuals seen in 2001. Murray notes seven nesting records and considers Kestrels to be a common resident. Kestrels are reported along the Blue Ridge Mountains during fall hawk migration (Rockfish Gap Hawk Watch reports an average of 122 individuals per year with the peak migration occurring from late September to mid-October). Historical records suggest that Kestrels are now less common.
Status: Common year-round resident and breeder with winter migrants and should be seen in the county.
Photo: Near Stuart's Draft, 22 December 2010 (by Lucy Rowe).
For additional photos: American Kestrel

Merlin (*Falco columbarius*):

Occurrence: Transient during migration
Dates: September through May
Locations: RC
History: Alex Merritt saw a Merlin on 14 October 2010 in the Jonestown area of the county. Dick and Lucy Rowe located a Merlin at Willow Lake on 1 May 2011. In addition, there are two recent records from the CBC (2009, 1991). Murray reports five records: 13-14 April (1933), 3 May (1948), 22 September (1941) and 13 September (1948). The Rockfish Gap Hawk Watch reports an average of 16 individuals per year migrating along the Blue Ridge Mountains with the peak migration occurring from mid to late October. It is likely that individuals could be seen migrating south along the Blue Ridge Parkway in the fall.
Status: Rare migrant through the area and not be expected to be seen.
Photo: Both photos taken at Willow Lake, 1 May 2011 by Lucy Rowe.
For additional photos: Merlin

Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*):

Occurrence: Transient and migrant through the area
Dates: Fall migration (September through February)
Locations: MF, northern RC
History: There are three recent sightings. One by Paul Cabe in the Raphine area on 13 February 2007, one by Kieran Kilday on 8 September 2010 at McCormick's Farm, and one by Alex Merritt and Kieran Kilday on 18 November 2010 at McCormick's Farm. In addition, DGIF reports a successful breeding in the county during 2011 (two nestlings were fledged). Two reports of Peregrine Falcons have been noted in the CBC in 1958 and 1951. Murray reports that a nesting pair was in the county (a nest found by Bob Paxton near the entrance to Goshen Pass in 1975) but gives no date or location and notes that he had seen individuals between April and September**.** The Rockfish Gap Hawk Watch reports an average of 24 individuals per year migrating along the Blue Ridge Mountains with the peak migration occurring in late September. The Rockfish Gap Hawk Watch observation station would be the best location for seeing a Peregrine Falcon during the fall.
Status: Uncommon and often seen as migrant through the area and not be expected to be seen.