

Bird Feeder Observations

by Michael Kieffer

We would like to share a story of curiosity that happened at this time of year a few years ago. It is a reminder that while we may be at home, you can create lasting memories just by watching and enjoying what may visit your yard.

“At BRMC, we walk a fine line with our bird feeders. We do not wish to attract bears, but we cannot stop feeding the birds. We need the birds, regardless of whether they need food. There is no better way to excite adults and children than by viewing these amazing species, from 4 feet away, at eye level, through our front window. Soon, usually in the first days of May, the rose-breasted grosbeak will be stopping in to grab a quick bite, on its migration north. Anyone who has been lucky enough to be at the Mountain House during one of these visits never forgets the impression it makes.



M. Kieffer

Yesterday, a seven-year old girl, with her wonderful seven-year old mind, sat, observing the bird feeders, and we were struck by her questions. She observed grackles, but wondered if they were European starlings, for she knew ‘they were bad’. The next question was about the birds with the “brown head”. I told her they were brown-headed cowbirds and the females lay their eggs in other birds’ nests. All the while, she told us, with her eyes, about the beautiful American goldfinches. “All males,” I said in my head, but I hesitated to interfere and tell her. They have returned in force to our feeders starting a week ago. What I did tell her was that they are feeding heavily to prepare to mate -- ‘Goldfinches nest later in the season than most birds, they prefer to line their nests with the soft down of thistle seeds.’ She pauses with a questioning look—‘did you say that the brown-headed cowbirds do not make their own nest? How do their babies find other cowbirds if different birds raise them?’ I think, if only we “leaders” thought so clearly.

When most of our permanent resident birds are deep into nesting, like they are now, it makes for some of the most fascinating bird feeder viewing. It is an orchestra both in time of day and over different weeks as to which species you can find taking in the free bite. Birds come at specific moments during each day, and it seems it is specific to the species and landscape. We know nesting birds need to feed their mates and/or young, so they only feed at our feeders for themselves. We also know that a species, such as the goldfinches, that are feeding all day, have no parenting responsibilities.



M. Kieffer

In late April/early May, we rely more heavily on the thistle seed feeders to maximize the golden glow of the male goldfinches that will feed non-stop, all day, until they begin to nest. Thistle feeders do not attract bears, or squirrels for that matter, because the seed does not offer enough calories to expend the effort. The hummingbird feeders are placed out in the garden waiting for our smallest, but possibly most amazing migratory bird to arrive. Bears may not be a problem, but I have observed squirrels and goldfinches tipping the feeder and feeding on the sugar water.

Back to the question the young girl had about the bird with the brown head and as she said the ‘beautiful greenish shiny body’. I started again, ‘it is a male brown-headed cowbird...’, and I begin to tell her about the unique natural history of this bird that was considered a criminal of the bird world by an earlier generation that tended to anthropomorphize animal behaviors. We begin with its “villainous” behavior of never raising their young. *(continued on page 2)*

SHOOTING THE BREEZE
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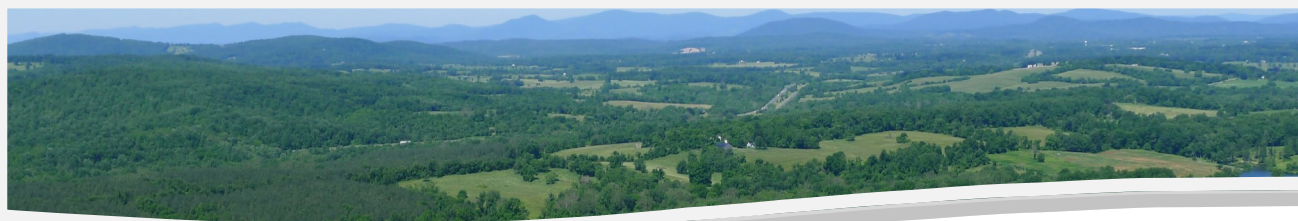
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Bird Feeder Observations

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Over thousands of years, 'buffalo birds', as cowbirds were known, evolved as birds of the prairie in a symbiotic relationship with the bison. The bison kicked up thousands of insects for cowbirds to forage and the cowbirds helped the buffalo by feeding on parasites that inflicted them, such as ticks. Following the buffalo herds left no time for females to spend nest building, laying and incubating eggs, and feeding young. Instead, the females searched out and laid their eggs in other birds' nests. For their part, other prairie birds evolved ways of concealing their nests, usually in mounds. The arms race between the nest parasites and their hosts continued for millennia until humans became a game changer.

Bison herds were slaughtered and all but completely eliminated. Prairies became farmland, and new harvest methods provided a new winter food source when insects were scarce. The cowbird flocks grew with the greater food and increased winter survival. Cowbirds were forced to switch to livestock in the bison's absence, and began to concentrate from year to year in the same landscapes. The cowbird, in less than 200 years, went from being part of a natural symbiotic prairie relationship to a "bird conservation threat". They add another stress to migratory woodland birds that never evolved with this nest parasite pressure and have no means to prevent it.

She listened, inquired, and sighed -- 'Why are starlings so bad?' ...Without the youth that visit us daily here at BRMC, it would be hard to remember really how simple, yet complex nature can be. A child's curiosity is the key to life. We wish you all the best at being a kid at heart."

BRMC Youth Outdoor Naturalist Camps

Summer 2020



Registration is open for all camps & workshops on our website, www.brmconservancy.org.

BUDDING NATURALIST CAMP*

July 13th—17th, 9:00am-12:00pm

At this week-long camp, young children will be exposed to the outdoors and wildlife, as they explore life on the Bull Run Mountains through a series of discovery hikes, frog and salamander searches, snake viewing, stream exploration and nature crafts. Ages 4-6.

Pre-registration required.

Members: \$125/non: \$175

SUMMER NATURALIST CAMPS*

Session I: July 20th-24th, 9:00am-4:00pm

Session II: July 27th-31st, 9:00am-4:00pm

BRMC invites your child to spend an adventurous week interacting with the natural world. Each day we will focus on different groups of plants and animals on the Bull Run Mountains. Campers will add to their understanding of natural systems through hikes, stream walks, snake handling (only if desired), frog and salamander catching, bird watching, butterfly and insect collecting, crafts and games. Ages 7-12.

Pre-registration is required.

Members: \$250/non: \$300

CHESAPEAKE WATERSHED WORKSHOP*

August 3rd-August 6th, 9:00am-4:00pm

With support from the Chesapeake Bay Restoration Fund, six scholarships are available for this workshop. Please contact us at info@brmconservancy.org to request an application. The workshop will focus on the conservation of the rivers and streams that flow into the Chesapeake Bay. We will explore headwater streams on the Bull Run Mountains, go downstream on Little Bull Run and visit Turkey Run National Park. At each location students will perform stream monitoring, vegetation analyses, and stream habitat and riparian buffer evaluations. Ages 13-18.

Pre-registration required.

Members: \$200/non: \$250

**Our host property for these events is the Bull Run Mountains Natural Area Preserve (BRMNAP), which is owned and operated by the Virginia Outdoors Foundation (VOF), a public organization dedicated to the preservation of our state's open-space lands.*

Returning to Our Roots

by Frannie Barnes

Over the past month or so we have all been learning to adjust to a new and very different existence. With the many changes made by social distancing, we've had an invaluable opportunity to evaluate our daily habits and find ways to become more resourceful. And while there is never an opportune time for a pandemic, one silver lining is that we are safe at home during the spring, where we can watch the wonders of nature as the sprouts of new life give us hope.

Gardening has been a long-time hobby of mine and over the years I've learned what I can grow, and anecdotally, more of what I can't. I've learned that tomato plants won't thrive under the canopy of a black walnut tree's branches, which is the same distance as its root system that contains a natural substance that is toxic to tomatoes. I've learned that February is not the ideal time to build a garden box because by the time April brings its beautiful blooms and leaves, your sun exposure might be quite different! With those difficult lessons have also come fruitful ones, such as learning to leave my seemingly dead fig tree alone rather than pruning it and watching it sprout new life from the ground up.

(Incidentally, this same fig tree was purchased at Mount Vernon, is a descendant of George Washington's very own fig tree garden, and has even been planted in two different gardens!) Over the years I've paid close attention to what nature has taught me and with each passing year I try to apply these lessons. Currently my family and I have been growing microgreens on our kitchen counter, experimenting with a hydroponic garden for the third year in a row, and recently purchased mason bees to help pollinate our gardens. This past March the lesson was clear. It might be worth investigating ways to grow more of my own food year-round so that when resources are scarce, we are not scrambling.



Education is one of BRMC's core tenets and it has been difficult and sad for us not to see our homeschool kids, or hike together with BRMC family members to discuss the wonders of spring in the Bull Run Mountains. But we have been trying to stay engaged and share educational opportunities through emails and our social media pages. I came across an article on how you can re-grow foods from certain vegetables that would otherwise be deemed as kitchen scraps: romaine lettuce, celery, green onion to name a few. And at a time when we're not going out to the store very often and would normally be starting seeds or buying vegetable plants to plant in the garden, it's a great chance to try and grow what we can from what we have – both an education and playing an important role in conservation. Just think of what you save by not going to the store to buy a plant – gas, money, plastic, etc.

My 10-year old son and I set out on a mission to regrow what we could from our scraps, and it's been a fun experiment. He began with an avocado pit. By simply cutting the bottom off, securing it with three toothpicks and submerging the bottom in water, it has sprouted and slowly but surely created roots for our own avocado tree. It will likely not create a tree that bears fruit; however, it is a fun experiment for kids to see how life can come from a pit.



We have had success with other foods, such as peppers. We simply scraped the seeds into a bowl and let them dry and have since planted the seeds in starter blocks and have four plants that have begun to grow! You can do the same thing with tomato seeds.

Romaine lettuce is a fun and very simple experiment. Take a romaine heart, place it in a shallow bowl of water and within a matter of days you will see new leaves emerge. This won't produce another whole head of lettuce, but it will produce enough for a garnish or to put on a sandwich. Celery is another easy one that unlike romaine, can be transplanted in the soil to continue to grow. Place the bottom of a bunch of celery in water and wait for the root system to emerge. While this is happening small stalk of celery will grow from the top. *(Continued on page 5)*

Leopold's Preserve~

Leopold's Preserve had a successful prescribed burn. It was conducted by the Virginia Department of Forestry to improve wildlife habitat.



LEOPOLD'S PRESERVE Weekend Warrior Volunteer Program

We need your help to conserve Leopold's Preserve. Volunteers can go out at their own convenience any day, not just on the weekend. Volunteers will pick up trash and keep track of trail issues (mainly tree fall and where it occurred). The only thing we ask is that you keep track of these issues and your volunteer time on the Weekend Warrior volunteer form and send the form to us at least once a month, if you are a frequent participant or if it is a one time volunteer effort that you report the results.

For more information, visit: hbrmconservancy.org/volunteer or leopoldspreserve.com/weekend-warrior



Returning to Our Roots

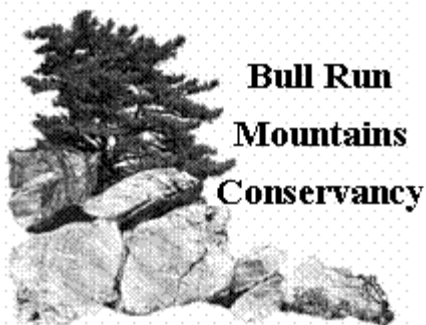
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Composting is a simple way to reuse food waste and feed the earth rather than creating more trash. There are countertop receptacles you can use, or backyard containers, or even a covered pile in a sunny place in the yard. There are some caveats, though, you don't want to compost processed foods, dairy or meat scraps, and highly acidic fruits and vegetables such as citrus and onions.

Personally speaking, with the daily busyness of life, despite my best efforts, there were weeks when food would go to waste. Staying at home has helped me reframe my thoughts about food and waste. I actively seek ways to use what I have or, in some cases, learn to give new life to otherwise wilting perishable foods such as leafy greens. Soaking in cold water, drying off and keeping in the fridge can extend their life.



If any of these experiments pique your interest, there are many more resources online where you can find out what you can do using some time, ingenuity, patience, and fruits and vegetables you already have.



Bull Run Mountains Conservancy

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Bull Run Mountains Conservancy is a membership driven organization.

Become a member today and support our programs and support the public preserve. Your membership provides BRMC necessary funds to operate and shows our foundation and corporate supporters that the public values and appreciates the resource.

Membership Benefits:

- Support environmental and historical programs for all ages
- Support research on and around the Mountains
- Discounts on all public programs and camps
- Quarterly newsletter including our program calendar

Bull Run Mountains Conservancy	2020 Calendar of Events	Budding Naturalist Camp July 13th-17th	Summer Naturalist Camp Session I- July 20th-24th Session II- July 27th-31st	Chesapeake Watershed Workshop August 3rd- August 6th	<p>Directions: Take I-66 to Haymarket exit. Go south on Rt. 15. Go west on Rt. 55 for 2.7 miles. Turn right on Turner Rd., then left on Beverley Mill Dr. to the Mountain House 3/4 mi. on left.</p> <p>Unless otherwise noted, all programs and events will meet at the BRMC Mountain House at 17405 Beverley Mill Drive in Broad Run, VA, across from the Bull Run Mountains State Natural Area Preserve trailhead.</p>
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