On The Hunt
For Virginia’s Breeding Birds

By Glenda Booth
A snail Pele was stopped in her tracks by the sight of a ruffed grouse’s (Bonasa umbellus) tail of feathers flapping out in the wind. Some of the forest’s most intriguing behaviors: “Drum” their wings to attract a mate, and shed the feathers that come along with it. Other birds like ruffed grouse and raptors add shiny, sparkly objects to their stick nests. Phil Peele, a wildlife biologist working with the Conservation Department of the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, describes the cedar waxwing (Bombycilla cedrorum) and its behavioral oddities like Styrofoam cups, kites, and even a bird’s fancy also turns to love, though not always lightly. “A young man’s fancy turns to love, though not always lightly. Breeding birds engage in all sorts of intriguing behaviors:

• Male ruffed grouse “drum” their wings over a large log, a sound that travels for miles.
• Male terns bring gifts of fish to females during courtship.
• Birds become creative nest builders. Ospreys (Pandion haliaetus) add oddities like Styrofoam cups, kites, bones, rags, plastic bags, and shiny, streamers to their stick nests. Phil Lehman, a Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge bird expert, watched a Northern parula (Setophaga americana) puddle its nest with tent caterpillar webbing last spring. Crows and ravens add shiny, sparkly objects like aluminum foil. “If you can find the craziest things in there, even jewelry,” says Pele.

Documenting Virginia’s Birds

Virginia is fanning out across the state to document breeding birds for the second Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas (VABA2), an ambitious five-year inventory that began in 2016 and runs through 2020. This atlas is an update of the state’s first such bird inventory completed in 1989 and is being coordinated by Dr. Pele. Dr. Peele tends to think big picture. “The world is changing rapidly in ways that will affect all living things. It is critical for us to understand how issues like changing land use will affect natural ecosystems that we all enjoy and depend on. Birds are not only fun to watch, but can tell us a great deal about what is happening ecologically in a given place and time. We need to engage people with our natural resources because we can all play a role in their stewardship.”

The atlas project includes 12 distinct regions, each headed by a local coordinator. Within each region, bird data will be collected in geographic blocks that are roughly nine square miles in size. Up to three volunteers can sign up to survey a single block, which entails about 20 hours of field time. To participate, volunteers can contact a local coordinator to find a block in their area. Block surveyors will survey each block two times during the breeding season to collect data from the most abundant birds.

How They Survey

The atlas project is coordinated by the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation. Project managers will host atlas trainings in 2017, including one at the Virginia Society of Ornithology’s annual meeting from May 5-7, hosted by the Richmond Audubon Society. For More Information: Check Out Our Video: https://youtu.be/nIs212r_eZU

Atlas Handbook, Block Explorer: www.vabba2.org

Atlas eBird portal for articles and updates: https://ebird.org/atlasva

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