


2025



Annual REPORT

**PROTECTING WILDLIFE THROUGH FIELD
RESEARCH, EDUCATION AND HABITAT
CONSERVATION SINCE 1994**

 vawildliferesearch.org



Welcome to the 2025 CVWO Annual Report!

Be sure to click the links below to explore individual research topics and discover in depth the amazing work CVWO accomplished in 2025.

President's Report



As you'll see in the excellent reports here, it was another great year of data-gathering and public education in the name of conservation. Our Board has been busy evaluating many creative ideas. New, is our foray into Morning Flight counts, an approach that is growing with momentum. Fascinating is the technology that allows a Monarch to carry a solar panel...what????!! The Team Reports show the dedication of our volunteers and seasonal biologists, and our Conservation Grants highlight terrific

non-profit partners.

In early 2026, we will be part of an effort, along with Virginia Commonwealth University, to try to solve a mystery with nesting Prothonotary Warbler production at Northwest River in Chesapeake. In spring 2026, we celebrate the 30th anniversary of our College Creek Hawkwatch, and then in fall 2026, we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Kiptopeke Hawkwatch, all made possible by dedicated volunteers and seasonal staff.

Please enjoy our free monthly eNewsletters to keep informed of happenings!

We look forward to new partnership opportunities, and we sincerely thank our amazing and generous donors! We couldn't do this without you.

Brian Taber

You can reach Brian at this [email](#)

RAPTOR RESEARCH

PEREGRINE FALCON

COASTAL VIRGINIA WILDLIFE OBSERVATORY

CVWO Raptor Research

CVWO's Raptor Research includes seasonal migratory observations of raptors passing through two Hawkwatch sites along Virginia's coastal plain. The fall hawkwatch is conducted on Virginia's Eastern Shore at Kiptopeke State Park, and the spring watch is in James City County at College Creek along the James River.

Counters submit data to [Hawkcoun.org](https://www.hawkcoun.org), which contributes to the Hawk Migration Association's Raptor Population Index (RPI), a project that produces conservation assessments and population trends derived from migration counts of raptors.

As if the challenges of long-distance migration were not enough, according to research published in March 2025 in GeoHealth, scientists have found that, increasingly, raptors are transporting H5N1 bird flu pathogen. The original research article was summarized at [Phys.org](https://www.phys.org).

"Far more bird species than ducks, geese and swans are transporting highly pathogenic H5N1 today, the study found. Cormorants, pelicans, buzzards, vultures, hawks, and Peregrine Falcons play significant roles in spreading avian flu. That makes them both victims and vectors of the disease and upends traditional approaches to monitoring H5N1 spread and predicting and responding to outbreaks. Culling of poultry birds worked in the past to mitigate burgeoning outbreaks, but it has failed to stop the current outbreak."

Our watch sites are popular destinations, and we enjoy sharing our efforts and mission with the public.

- [Kiptopeke Hawkwatch Report](#)
 - [College Creek Hawkwatch Report](#)
-



About CVWO Butterfly Research

Since 1998, when CVWO established a Monarch Butterfly Migration Program at Kiptopeke State Park, volunteers have conducted fall surveys and tagged Monarchs. Monarch numbers are declining at an alarming rate due to a variety of factors. Several tagged Monarchs have later been found at their winter roost sites near Mexico City, but that is still a frustratingly small gain of information for 600+ monarchs tagged each of the last few seasons.

According to a Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation press release issued in March 2026, “The amount of overwintering habitat occupied by monarch butterflies in central Mexico increased 64% from last year, according to the annual census released today by World Wildlife Fund-Mexico and partners. The butterflies were found covering an area of 7.24 acres, which means the eastern monarch population that migrates between Canada and Mexico each year showed an improvement from last winter’s area of 4.42 acres. The annual survey measures the area of forest in which monarch butterflies hibernate each winter, providing a reliable indicator of the eastern monarch’s population status.

“While an increase is great news, the numbers in Mexico are still well below historic norms,” said Scott Black, director of the Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation. “With the western monarch population that overwinters in California seeing the third-worst year on record, we urgently need better protections for this beloved butterfly.”

Thanks to new ultralight transmitters, scientists are now able to tag and track the butterflies along their migratory routes, opening up new opportunities to understand their conservation needs.

Source: Xerces Society

To that end, CVWO partnered with Birds Canada in the fall of 2025 to quickly get up to speed with the new monitoring technology. Our Monarch biologist was trained in the application of these transmitters and two butterflies were tagged and tracked in real time down to Florida and the Gulf Coast. The process was incredibly rewarding for the organization members and is an exciting development in Monarch research. CVWO will be expanding this transmitter monitoring program for 2026.

- [Monarch Migration Project](#)
- [Williamsburg Area Butterfly Count](#)
- [Chippokes Butterfly Count](#)
- [Delmarva Tip Butterfly Count](#)



About the Waterbirds Team

The Coastal Virginia Wildlife Observatory’s Waterbirds Team was formalized in 2015 to maintain the continuity of shorebird and colonial nesting seabird monitoring studies. The CVWO Waterbird Team devoted the 2025 field work to documenting the volume and diversity of bird species frequenting Craney Island Dredged Materials Management Area

(CIDMMA) in Portsmouth, Virginia. Breeding activity was focused on three species: Black-necked Stilts, American Oystercatchers, and Least Terns. In addition to shorebird and seabird studies, CVWO sponsors Wood Duck monitoring at Harwoods Mill with support from the City of Newport News.

- [Waterbird Team Report](#)
- [Wood Duck Research](#)



About Songbird Research

CVWO volunteers monitor two species in the coastal plain of Virginia – Prothonotary Warblers at six sites and Purple Martins at four sites.

In September 2019, the journal **Science** released a study telling us that the number of birds in the US and Canada had fallen by 29% since 1970, resulting in 2.9 billion fewer birds. That study grabbed lots of attention.

Here we are seven years later, and the news is bleaker. In another study, relying on some of the same data sources, published in the journal **Science** in February 2026, researchers are finding that “birds in the United States are not only declining, but they are declining faster, especially in areas with intensive agriculture, according to new research. Overall drops in bird population, measured from 1987 to 2021, were sharpest in warm and warming areas, suggesting that climate change may play a role.

“The study shows only correlation, not causation, with intensive agriculture and does not factor in other circumstances that may be affecting birds along migratory routes or while they are overwintering.”

This is the latest in multiple studies that tell us that birds – “one of the best measured families of animals on Earth, and a sentinel for the health of other species – are not OK.”

Fewer insects, outdoor cats, window strikes, habitat loss, climate change and intensive agriculture – all impact bird populations. Sadly, the losses will continue until sustained, concerted efforts at every level in our communities, states, and nation make our biodiversity a priority.

So, what can YOU do as an individual? Among other things, support conservation organizations in your local community with your energy, imagination, and funds. Participate



in local citizen science surveys that contribute to national data bases. If you're so inclined, support local, state, and national legislation that supports wildlife conservation on a large scale. Joining with like-minded folks in your community multiplies your support. So get out there!

Source: Acceleration hotspots of North American birds' decline are associated with agriculture" Francois Leroy, Vol 391, Issue 6788. February 26, 2026. View article [HERE](#).

- [Prothonotary Warbler Report](#)
- [Purple Martin Monitoring](#)



In 2025, CVWO awarded four Graduate Student Research Grants to the following students:

Investigating avian contributions to Gulf Coast tick distribution within Coastal Virginia

Iroshmal Peiris is a Master of Science student in the Department of Biological Sciences at Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA. His advisor is Dr. Eric L. Walters. Birds are an ideal vector for ticks because of their high vagility, unlike more limited dispersal opportunities observed in mammals, reptiles, and amphibians. There is ample evidence to suggest that Gulf Coast tick activity is highest during the fall migration time. Iroshmal proposes to intensively sample birds in the key coastal areas in Virginia, where Gulf Coast ticks have invaded in 2023.

Effects of urbanization on community-level bird vocalizations in coastal Virginia

Oleksii Dubovyk is a PhD Student in Ecological Sciences in the Department of Biological Sciences at Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA, 23529, USA. His advisor is Dr. Eric L. Walters, Oleksii will test whether levels of urbanization are associated with community-wide changes in bird vocalizations. He hypothesizes that even when standardized by local species richness, vocalizations exhibited by urban avian communities will be less diverse and higher-pitched compared to communities from less urbanized areas.

The William & Mary graduate students listed below are recipients of grants from the following funds: **Ruth Beck Bird Research Fund**, the **Joy Archer Study Fund**, and **Bill Akers Environmental Education Fund**. You can read about these generous donors by visiting our [Support Page](#).

Understanding how birds interact with large-scale solar utility sites

Sarah Riney is a Master of Science Candidate in Biology at William & Mary. Dr. John Swaddle is her advisor. Sarah will describe and quantify the presence of avian species and their behaviors at solar sites across different geographic regions of the U.S. This project investigates patterns of avian community composition and probability of site use at a solar facility in southeastern Virginia. These patterns are compared with those at a nearby pre-solar development agricultural reference site. Bird activity is monitored using trail cameras and sound recording units during two seasonal monitoring.

Investigating the source of mercury in Virginia's terrestrial songbirds

Sophie Rabinowicz is a Master of Science Candidate in Biology at William & Mary. Dr. Dan Cristol is her advisor. Spiders are increasingly being considered a source of mercury for terrestrial insectivorous species such as songbirds. "Cursorial" spiders, including the familiar wolf spiders (family *Lycosidae*) rather than web-weaving spiders, delivered 60% of the mercury in the diet of the heavily contaminated songbirds in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley. By using DNA metabarcoding to unravel the diets of wolf spiders in this system, we can trace the mercury found in birds back through spiders to a predominantly aquatic or terrestrial source, offering crucial insights for conservation and restoration efforts in Virginia and around the world.

Coastal Virginia Birdathon

**COASTAL
VIRGINIA
BIRDATHON**



2025 FUNDS RAISED

\$22,203

Thank you to the teams, volunteers, supporters and organizations that made the 2025 Coastal Virginia Birdathon a huge success!

Congratulations to **The Islanders**, who take home the coveted Piping Plover Trophy for raising the most funds in support of CVWO. This year, the event took place on September 27, where 11 total teams raised a whopping

\$22,203

in support of CVWO wildlife, research, conservation, and education efforts. Congrats to the other winners, including **The Islanders (3-hour category)**, **Counting Crows (Special Venue)**, **Morning Warblers** (24-hour category) and **Laughing Falcons** (Large Group).

[READ THE BIRDATHON REPORT HERE](#)

Morning Flight



This fall marked the first season of CVWO's Sunset Beach Morning Flight Count. Morning flight is understood to be a behavior to "correct course" during migration, typically exhibited by nocturnal migrant songbirds after a night of migration. During fall on the East Coast, this behavior is typically associated with certain weather

conditions. Winds out of the northwest, often accompanying autumn cold fronts, provide a tailwind for many birds to use as they make their way south across the continent. Despite their benefits as a tailwind, strong northwesterly winds tend to displace a large number of migrants in eastern North America well east of their intended flight path. This displacement is called wind drift.

Many of these migrating birds thus find themselves in a perilous situation after experiencing wind drift: They are much closer to the coast than they intended, or even worse, find themselves flying out over the open water of the Chesapeake Bay or Atlantic Ocean as the sun rises. Flying over open water during the day is a dangerous energy expenditure for a nocturnal migrant that would much rather be refueling or resting in a habitat with cover.

Morning flight is generally thought to be an important way for birds to correct for wind drift and avoid further travel complications. It may also be exhibited by birds selecting foraging habitats in the early morning. The narrow, funnel-shaped peninsula of the Eastern Shore acts as a natural concentration point for migrants, waterlocked to the west and south by the Chesapeake Bay, and to the east by the Atlantic Ocean. Surrounded by water, migrants concentrate at the tip of the peninsula and correct course, sending them straight past Sunset Beach as they turn north to look for somewhere on the peninsula to forage, while other forward migrants continue south towards Fisherman's Island or across the Chesapeake Bay.

Birders have long known of the incredible morning flight spectacles that occur at Sunset Beach, but fall 2025 is the first time a daily count was conducted using standardized data collection protocols. CVWO has joined other ongoing morning

flight counts elsewhere around the world, documenting this unique migratory behavior.

Documenting the volume and species composition of birds engaging in morning flight at Sunset Beach throughout the fall season was the primary goal of this project. Other birds and insects engaging in forward migration were also counted. This data will also inform habitat management decisions to support the diversity of migrant species moving through the Eastern Shore and will help further our understanding of the varying factors influencing morning flight behavior.

Pictured above is a Northern Flicker captured during Morning Flight photographed by Baxter Beamer.

[Read the Full 2025 Morning Flight Report Here](#)



Black-and-white Warbler by Baxter Beamer

Red-breasted Nuthatch by Baxter Beamer

CVWO Supports Conservation Grants in 2025

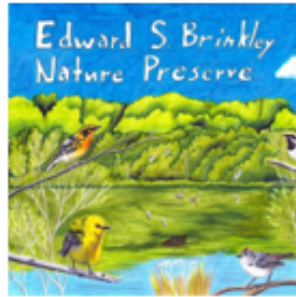
CVWO is proud to provide small grants to our deserving non-profit partners. In 2025, we again helped and supported the following organizations:

- **Hawkwatches** in Veracruz, Mexico and in Costa Rica at Talamanca
- Student grant in memory of **Ned Brinkley at the Finch Research Network**
- **Tom Johnson Memorial Youth Scholarship Fund at the American Birding Association** for youth birding camps
- Species adoptions for the **Breeding Bird Atlas Program** of the Virginia Society of Ornithology
- Sponsored the guest speaker at the **Winter Wildlife Festival** in Virginia Beach

Congratulations to these non-profits that work hard to promote wildlife conservation.



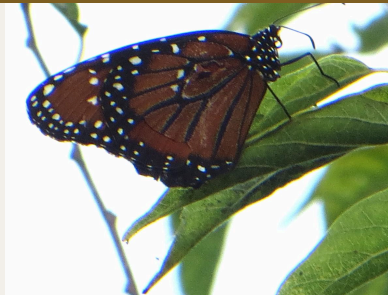
FINCH RESEARCH NETWORK



Notable Sightings in 2025

Queen Butterfly

Dave Youker found this very rare Queen during a Waterbird Team survey at Craney Island on October 2. Darker than a Monarch, it's a southern species that can wander northward.



Black-headed Gull

This Black-headed Gull, seen at the Jamestown Ferry by Brian Taber and Nancy Barnhart, represents an extremely rare July record, especially for an adult. The only one recorded further south in eBird was a bird in Florida in 2009. The species is widespread in Europe and Asia, and breeds sparsely in Newfoundland and possibly Greenland.

CVWO Projects & Teams

Team Leads for 2026

Raptors | Brian Taber

Butterflies | Deborah Humphries

Songbirds | Shirley Devan



Raptors



Butterflies



Waterbirds



Songbirds



Conservation Grants



Education



CVWO Coloring Book

CVWO would like to thank Anna Stunkel and the American Birding Association for providing artwork and images for this book. Funding for this project was provided through the Bill Akers Environmental Education fund of CVWO. Limited hard copies are still available. If you contact us, we'll mail you a copy!

Visit our friends who provided art:

- [Anna Stunkel Art](#)

- [American Birding Association](#)

BIRD COLORING BOOK



Protecting wildlife through field research,
education and habitat conservation

vawildliferesearch.org

[Download it Here!](#)

CVWO Partners

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Conservancy](#)

[City of Chesapeake Parks,
Recreation & Tourism](#)

[Eastern Shore of Virginia
National Wildlife Refuge](#)

[Finch Research Network](#)

[James City County Parks & Recreation](#)

[Kiptopeke State Park](#)

[Monarch Joint Venture](#)

[Hampton Roads Bird
Club](#)

[Hawk Migration
Association](#)

[Virginia Department of
Conservation and
Recreation](#)

[U.S. Army Corp of
Engineers \(CIDMMA\)](#)


[U.S. Fish & Wildlife
Service](#)

[Virginia Master
Naturalists, Historic
Rivers Chapter](#)

[Virginia Society of
Ornithology](#)

[Williamsburg Bird Club](#)

SUPPORT CVWO



Your donation can make a big difference in 2026. Use the form below to join or renew your 2026 CVWO support and donate to one of our ongoing projects such as the Kiptopeke Hawkwatch, Monarch butterfly research, waterbird research, warbler nest box trails, or graduate student scholarships. No donation is too small and every gift is welcome.

If you are a life member or have already donated in 2026 — many thanks! Perhaps you'd consider another donation to one of our projects or a scholarship!

We look forward to hearing from you!

I want to support CVWO's 2026 research. Enclosed is my check for:

Support Level:

Warbler \$25

Sparrow \$50

Thrush \$100

Falcon \$250

Eagle \$500 (Life Supporter)

Other _____

I would like to make an additional donation for:

Purchase Brian Taber's book, "Riding the Wind: A Birder's Ups and Downs" \$25

Kiptopeke Hawkwatch

Monarch butterfly research

Waterbird research

Professional Warbler and Purple Martin research

Annual Scholarships to William and Mary & Old Dominion Graduate Students

Name _____

Address _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Email (please print clearly) _____

If not already in Constant Contact, may we include your email in our Constant Contact List? Yes ___ No ___
(We do not share email addresses.) Mailings include the CVWO's monthly e-newsletter and Annual Report.

Return this form with your check, payable to CVWO, to: PO BOX 764, Lightfoot, VA 23090-0764

Or you may donate securely and quickly online with PayPal. You don't need a PayPal account. Visit our website at <http://vawildliferesearch.org/support-cvwo> where you can donate with your credit or debit card.

Thank you! Your interest and generosity are more important than ever!

Thank you for supporting CVWO's nonprofit work and our mission to protect wildlife through field research, education, and habitat conservation!

Our paid seasonal biologists and our dedicated volunteers work to solve those conservation problems by gathering data and providing public education. Your donations support that important effort.

Support CVWO



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