

Website: [www.vmnbansheereeks.org](http://www.vmnbansheereeks.org) Email: [vmnbansheereeks@gmail.com](mailto:vmnbansheereeks@gmail.com)

## President's Message

By *Barbara Erlandson*

As we head into 2018, there are lots of exciting new volunteer and CE opportunities for our members. We created a committee that is responsible for identifying projects that need funding. Some of these projects that are being considered are: Bat Monitoring; Bird Nest/Kestrel nest live streaming; Box Turtle Survey; Creating Interpretative Signs for Banshee Reeks; Junior Master Naturalist Program; Reaching Underserved Population Segments; Spotted Skunk, Species Surveys at Banshee Reeks, and a Traveling Naturalist Program.

In addition, there is a Winter Tree CE program on February 25 which will help you identify trees from the size, shape, bark texture, and lingering seed pods. And, on February 4, there will be a CE/volunteer opportunity with the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute. This opportunity is with the [eMammal](#) program. The CE is to learn how to set up the camera traps and identify what is captured. Once the training is complete (9:00am on the 4<sup>th</sup>), the specific locations to be monitored will be provided by the eMammal team and we're off with this interesting CS project.

## In This Issue

<b>PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE</b> .....	1
<b>KESTREL AND BARN OWL BOX CONSTRUCTION AND INSTALLATION</b> .....	1
<b>SKUNK CABBAGE</b> .....	3
<b>SANDHILL CRANES</b> .....	3
<b>BOOK REVIEW - BRINGING NATURE HOME BY DOUGLAS W. TALLAMY</b> .....	4
<b>BOOK REVIEW -- NATURE'S BURDENS BY DANIEL NELSON</b> .....	4
<b>HOLIDAY/WHITE ELEPHANT PARTY</b> .....	4
<b>COMMITTEE CORNER</b> .....	5
<b>ABOUT BANSHEE REEKS VMN</b> .....	6

## Kestrel and Barn Owl Box Construction and Installation

*Liz Dennison*

The American Kestrel is a beautiful little falcon native to the open rolling countryside of Northern Virginia. These colorful hunters, about the size of a robin, can be seen perched on power lines or soaring above meadows in search of a field mouse dinner. Although Kestrels are probably the most common diurnal raptor in North America, their population has shown a long-term decline in our area and throughout the Northeast amounting, by some estimates, to a cumulative loss of about 48%. Although there are several contributing factors, one of the most significant is a growing scarcity of nest sites. Housing and commercial development have cleared many acres of woodland and removed the standing dead trees with natural hollows that these cavity nesters depend on to lay their eggs and raise young.

Barn Owls have suffered a similar fate. These birds with pale, heart-shaped faces, long lanky legs, and

### SAVE THE DATES!

**Tick CE @ Banshee**  
Saturday, January 27<sup>th</sup>

**Banshee Reeks workdays**  
February 17<sup>th</sup> March 17<sup>th</sup> April 21<sup>st</sup>

**Winter Tree ID CE @ Banshee**  
Sunday, February 25<sup>th</sup> – 10 to 11am

eerie screams and hisses are truly unique among all other owls. There is nothing like the sight of this ghostly bird gliding silently through the night sky or peering down from the top of a silo. Barn Owls are widely distributed with active populations on all continents except Antarctica. Despite this healthy worldwide presence, many areas have experienced a precipitous decline. Once common in our area, Barn Owls are now rare due, in part, to changes in land use. Removal of old trees with large cavities and demolition of barns and silos have left these owls with few safe nesting sites in suitable habitats.



Barn Owl (*Tyto Alba*)

The good news is that we can do something to reverse the trend. Many successful projects have proven that placement of properly designed nest boxes, in appropriate habitat, can significantly improve population densities of these amazing birds of prey. Volunteers can participate in a variety of ways:

- Provide a site on their property for a nest box
- Contribute materials for the construction of nest boxes
- Build nest boxes
- Install nest boxes (requires walking through fields and climbing ladders)
- Monitor installed boxes (requires walking through fields and climbing ladders)
- Collect, tabulate, and report data
- Take photos, write a blog, etc.

In 2017, volunteers built and installed seven barn owl boxes in Northern Virginia. Two of these were installed at Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve as part of a Girl Scout Gold Award project. We also took over maintenance and monitoring of two additional boxes installed a few years ago by Boy Scouts. Some of the boxes were installed too late for the 2017 breeding season but will remain in place for

next year. One of the newly installed boxes was used and at least two, possibly three, barn owls were fledged from that nest. At least two barn owls have continued to roost at the site through December and will, hopefully, nest there again next year. We are also hopeful that some of our other boxes will be discovered and used. We plan to monitor and maintain these boxes and build and install more boxes in 2018.



American Kestrel (*Falco Sparverius*)

In 2016, we took over monitoring of more than 20 kestrel boxes in Fairfax and Loudoun Counties. Sadly, road widening, commercial development and new restrictions on access to most of those locations means that they are no longer viable for kestrels. But we're not giving up. In 2017, volunteers built and installed 8 new kestrel boxes. Four of these were installed at Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve as part of a Girl Scout Gold Award project. In addition, we were recently contacted about three additional boxes in good territories and will begin maintenance and monitoring of them next year. Most of these new boxes were installed too late for the 2017 breeding season but we hope the birds will find them to be attractive winter roosting sites and choose them as nesting sites in the spring. In December, we began coordinating our efforts with the Virginia Society of Ornithology (VSO). The VSO has an ongoing project to install 400 kestrel boxes and a separate monitoring and banding program. They have offered to donate as many boxes as we need for our project and assist with banding. Meetings are tentatively scheduled for early 2018 to discuss standardizing our monitoring protocols so our data can be shared with groups doing similar work in throughout the United States and Canada and with the American Kestrel Partnership.



Skunk Cabbage (*Symplocarpus foetidus*)

## Skunk Cabbage

*Bill Cour*

Winter isn't exactly prime time for wildflower enthusiasts, but it's possible to find something in bloom even as early as January. If you are in a low, wet area such as a creekside, around a seep or in a floodplane you may see a scattering of spiky leaves, some a mottled purplish or reddish brown and some green. These are the winter structures of Skunk Cabbage, a plant with a discouraging name but many interesting characteristics. The green spikes are the leaf buds, which will be up to several feet across by summer; the dark ones form a protective structure called a *spathe*, which contains a tubular structure, called a *spadix*, which is covered with small flowers. In order to be able to bloom at winter temperatures this plant can generate a considerable amount of heat, up to 70°F, enough to melt snow and ice and provide a welcoming environment for insects attracted by the pollen or the odor, which incorporates chemicals found in decaying animal and plant matter and is the reason for not only its common name but its specific epithet, *foetidus*. Its genus is called *Symplocarpus*, "connected fruit", since the seeds of the many flowers form a tight cluster when they mature. Individual plants can be quite long-lived. In the right conditions they can last for centuries or, according to some (admittedly controversial) researchers, possibly millennia. While not showy they are certainly worth a look if you spot some on a winter hike.



Sandhill Cranes (*Antigone canadensis*)

## Sandhill Cranes

*Bryan Henson*

Last winter and this winter, two [Sandhill Cranes](#) (*Antigone canadensis*) have spent their winter in Loudoun county. For Loudoun, these are rare birds that are expected to winter further south and spend much of their time further west. They seem to spend their nights at Algonkian Park - Sanctuary Trail. This rarely-visited park has several ponds and wetlands with close access to the Potomac River.

Sandhill Cranes stand several feet tall making them easy birds to pick out. Their fairly plain slate gray bodies lead to a long neck with a pale/white cheek with a red crown patch and a dark bill. When in the field, listen for their [rattle](#) call when they are flying. Unlike herons, cranes will fly with their neck extended giving them a pretty unique flight profile.

Cranes are evolutionarily quite old; fossils have been found dating back 2.5 million years. The cranes in Algonkian are probably from the [Eastern Population](#) (EP) (one of 6 populations defined by the USFWS) which is comprised of the greater Sandhill Crane subspecies - In the late 1800s, the EP was almost destroyed but has since rebounded. In 2015, the population was almost 95,000 strong. They are hunted in Kentucky and Tennessee. The [EP](#) breeds generally in the Great Lakes region, but their breeding range has expanded east to New York, Pennsylvania, and very recently ([2015](#)) to Maryland.

Their diet mostly consists of seeds and grains found within fields and marshes. They mate for life and typically lay two eggs often producing



only a single surviving young. They can live long lives spanning decades and typically don't breed until they are several years of age. The young are precocial and able to leave the nest in hours, but they won't leave their parents' sides for many months.

## Book review - Bringing Nature Home by Douglas W. Tallamy

*Reviewed by Crissy Bellandi*

This is an excellent book for anyone interested in transforming a yard into a habitat for native plants and wildlife. Many wild places have been developed, creating smaller, more fragmented spaces for wildlife and the presence of nonnative and invasive species is stressing the ability of native flora and fauna to survive. This book makes the case for moving away from farming lawn and planting nonnative ornamentals to rewilding outdoor spaces and using native plants. This book explains the importance of native plants in sustaining local animal populations and how the preservation of nature is dependent not just on national parks or refuges, but on individuals as well. It may not seem like one person can make a difference with just one yard, but it will certainly make a difference to the creatures finding suitable habitat on the property and help to facilitate the continued survival of local species.

## Book review -- Nature's Burdens by Daniel Nelson

*Reviewed by Crissy Bellandi*

This book takes an informative look at federal land use and conservation policies, detailing the shifts in policy stance from one presidential administration to another. For anyone interested in the role that federal agencies play in conserving (or not conserving) wild spaces and biodiversity, this book is a great primer to a complicated patchwork of laws and regulations along with the interplay between government, conservation groups and industry. It introduces key players from the conservation and environmental advocacy movement along with the role of federal agencies including the Forest Service, Bureau of Land

Management and Fish and Wildlife Service. The Endangered Species Act, National Forest Management Act and Federal Land Policy and Management Act are discussed at length, noting the effects of industry pressure and tactics by conservation groups in shaping the application of these laws. The book is accessible to both policy wonks and novices and outlines a clear timeline of events for the reader.

## Holiday/White Elephant Party

This year we moved the holiday party into January and converted it into a White Elephant gift exchange for a couple reasons. First, we had a hard time finding a venue – so if you would like to volunteer your house for the 2018 holiday party, let us know now! Second, the Host Committee struggled to find a good time for everyone. We are looking for more people to join the Host Committee and for someone to be the new chair of the Committee (let us know if you are interested).

In the end, we held the White Elephant party at Banshee Reeks on January 20th, 2018.



VMNers enjoying the White Elephant party

## COMMITTEE CORNER

### Volunteer Service Projects Committee

*Chair: Jane Yocom*

As we start another year, it's good to look back and see what we accomplished in the past year. I was very pleased to read in our Annual Report to the State that our 96 active VMN members contributed 4295 volunteer hours. Both Education/Outreach and Citizen Science accumulated over 1400 hours each! What a great accomplishment for our chapter.

This is also a good time to look back and see what each of us has accomplished as an individual member of our chapter in the past year and set a goal for ourselves for 2018. There is always room for improvement and a great need in our community for your help. Citizen Science, Education/Outreach, Stewardship & Chapter Administration...where can you use your talent and training in 2018?

### Historian

The Historian committee has been disbanded. If you have good photos, please send them to the chapter at [ymnbansheereeks@gmail.com](mailto:ymnbansheereeks@gmail.com) or post them on our [Facebook](#) page.

### Communications/Newsletter Committee

*Chair: Bryan Henson*

We're always looking for article contributions to the website, so remember that writing and research time count as VMN Volunteer Hours! We hope that you're enjoying our website, [www.bansheereeks.org](http://www.bansheereeks.org). Please also check out our [VMN-Banshee Reeks Chapter Facebook group](#). If you haven't yet joined, please do!

### Outreach Committee

*Chair: Brian Meyerriecks*

I am looking for creative and motivated volunteers to help create our display to woo and captivate audiences to join our chapter. I plan to schedule a meeting in the Feb/March timeframe, please send me your name to [brian@meyerriecks.com](mailto:brian@meyerriecks.com)

### Host Committee

*Chair: EMPTY – PLEASE VOLUNTEER*

What a "trade" event it was! January temps in the 60's while gifts were stolen in plain sight! Our Winter White Elephant member on January 20th followed a Volunteer Day at Banshee Reeks. Members gathered together to enjoy a variety of soups, tasty side dishes, desserts and a coffee/tea/cocoa bar for a post-holiday gift opening extravaganza! New Year 2018 planning is already underway for the Host Committee. Scheduled Member events for 2018: Training Class Graduation on April 7th, our Annual Summer Picnic in August (Date TBD), Annual Meeting on November 8th and our annual Holiday event in December. We ARE CURRENTLY SEEKING anyone interested in hosting (or innovative venue suggestions for) our Annual VMN Holiday Party in December 2018. You provide the home and we provide everything else! Contact the Host Committee or send us an email at [ymnbansheereeks@gmail.com](mailto:ymnbansheereeks@gmail.com).

### Membership Committee

*Chair: Frank McLaughlin*

Membership registration is now open and seven students have expressed interest. I believe that the interest has been generated through visits to Banshee Reeks (Julie has been handing out brochures and talking about the program) and interactions with our current members. We are very excited about the enthusiasm and education/work experience for each class and expect the 2018/19 class to be as strong as the current class.

The annual report was provided to the state for our chapter. We reported having 96 active members. Of this, 21 are trainees, 40 are Certified Virginia Master Naturalists, and 35 are VMN non-certified active members. This is an increase of 11 members as compared to last year. Total volunteer time has increased by 13%, with the largest increase (63%) in the Education and Outreach areas. Administration volunteer time has decreased by 29% ... this is a great trend!

### Continuing Education Committee

*Chair: Bill Cour*

If you have a class that you would like to offer for the chapter, or you see an event that you think would be a CE opportunity, or there is a topic on

which you would really like the chapter to present a class, contact Bill Cour ([wmkcour@gmail.com](mailto:wmkcour@gmail.com)).

[The Landscape For Life](#) program runs Tuesdays, February 13-April 4, 2018, 6:30-8:30 pm. Not all the classes will apply fully as CE, but a lot of fantastic material is presented.

### **Training Committee**

*Chair: Sue Robinson*

We are half way through training for the current VMN program. We have welcomed some new-to-us instructors, and so far, they have been very well received. A new, very hands-on Geology class was led by Karen Stone and allowed much interaction by students. Jim McGlone led the Urban Ecology class, and Biogeography/Risk Management was led by our sponsor, Kevin Rose. The committee is planning for the final and the practicum for the end of class, April 7. Planning is underway for the next year's program now, working to avoid volunteer

Saturdays, Native Plant sales and other major local events. More to come on that. Please encourage your neighbors and friends to join the next class.

### **About Banshee Reeks VMN**

The Banshee Reeks chapter of the Virginia Master Naturalist program is a volunteer corps focused on education, outreach, conservation, and management of the natural resources in Virginia. The chapter was founded in 2006 and focuses on Loudoun County and hosts many events at Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve. We are always looking for new members and like-minded organizations.

To find out more, visit our website at

<http://www.vmnbansheereeks.org/> or email us at [vmnbansheereeks@gmail.com](mailto:vmnbansheereeks@gmail.com).

And join our Facebook group:

[Virginia Master Naturalist-Banshee Reeks Chapter](#)