



Friends of Mason Neck State Park March 2021 Newsletter

**Register Now for
"Mow Less, Grow More!"
March 7 at 2 pm**



The Friends of Mason Neck State Park will host a special program, "Mow Less, Grow More," at 2 PM on Sunday, March 7. Our speaker will be Tami Sheiffer, the coordinator of Fairfax County Park Authority's "Watch the Green Grow" education and outreach initiative.

Learn how you can protect neighboring parks and natural habitat through your yard care by mowing less and growing more. Tami will discuss how to use native plants to expand wildlife corridors and stream buffers as well as help solve landscaping problems such as areas of erosion or poor drainage where grass will not grow.

The program is free, thanks to the generosity of the members and donors of the Friends of Mason Neck State Park. Registration is required, so we can send you the Zoom link for the program. You can register for the program [here](#).

Critter of the Month – Red-shouldered Hawks

By Randy Streufert

Red-shouldered Hawks are common throughout Virginia all year long. They are a medium-size hawk and can be seen and/or heard anywhere in the park.



male



female

Bird physiology is quite different than that of mammals. When males and females have the same markings, as is the case with these hawks, the only visible difference between the genders is relative size; the females are between 10% and 20% larger than males. Only after an exam by an ornithologist with the bird sedated can a bird's gender be determined with certainty.

Juveniles don't develop the deep reddish-brown color until fully mature. In the photo above the female has a noticeably lighter breast color, indicating she is probably a first-year adult.

Red-shouldered Hawks eat mostly small mammals, lizards, snakes, and amphibians. They hunt from perches below the forest canopy or at the edge of a pond, sitting silently until they sight their prey below. Then they descend swiftly, gliding and snatching a vole or chipmunk off the forest floor. They also eat toads, snakes, and crayfish. They occasionally eat smaller birds. While they've been known to prey on sparrows and doves, they also hunt starlings, which endears them to many of us with bird feeders.



Even with their reddish breast color, they blend in well with the surrounding tree foliage and can be a challenge to spot, especially when facing away from the viewer. The winter months offer the best time for seeing one perched in the park when the leaves are gone.



Red-shouldered Hawks are much more vocal than other raptors. They frequently call out declaring their territory from their perch or while soaring overhead. With a wingspan of about 40" they are only slightly larger than American Crows but noticeably smaller than Red-tailed Hawks, who have a 50" wingspan.



Red-shouldered Hawk pairs mate for life and are frequently seen flying and perched together during the mating and young-raising season; in this area that's typically January to early June.

In courtship, the male displays by flying upward, calling, then diving steeply. After becoming a pair, they may soar together in circles, calling, high over nesting territory. Mating requires a significant level of trust by both of them. The larger females make them a potentially deadly adversary to an unwelcome male. After the male gains the trust of the female, the female must trust the male during mating. With him on her back, he can easily inflict serious injury.

Mating is a multiple-step, somewhat awkward process. The female selects a perch and calls out until the male shows up and lands next to her. She bends over and he jumps up to land on her back. She has to grip the branch tightly and balance herself as she leans forward. He has to stay on top of her and avoid his natural tendency to close his talons. Instead, he must keep them wide open the whole time. If he starts to lose his balance, his talons may accidentally dig into her back and she will probably stand up quickly to force him off. After both are balanced, he maneuvers into position. Each must move their tail feathers before they briefly join.

The mating sequence shown below took just **eight** seconds – that’s from the time the male flew in to when he stepped off her back. He perched next to her for nine additional seconds (of cuddle time) before the female flew off.



This pair was observed mating between three and four times each day for about ten days. The eight-second mating time recorded in the above sequence was typical.

This pair was interesting in that the female selected the same three or four perch sites for mating each day. Site A was used every morning at about 9 AM. Site B was used every day at about noon and Site C was used every day at around 3 PM. Site D was sometimes used at about 5 PM.

As noted above, the male has to be careful not to use his talons when he is on the female's back. In the below sequence, the male had just landed on the female's back when she suddenly rose up, forcing the male to immediately get down. He probably inadvertently dug into the female's back because she seemed to have something to say to him afterward.

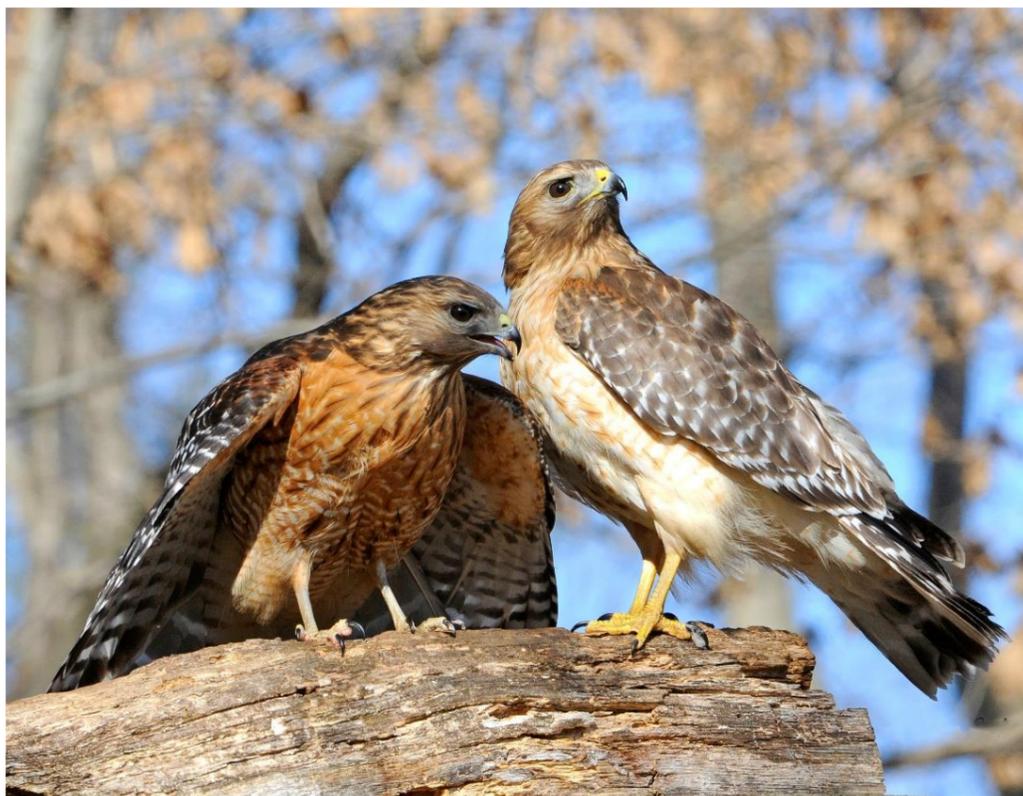


Both the male and female build the nest. The female usually lays two eggs and handles most of the four-week incubation period. While the female sits on the nest, the male hunts for both of them and brings her food. The chicks hatch blind and are covered in white down. They remain in the nest for about 45 days before fledging. The hatchlings require a lot of food. Both parents share the hunting required to help the new babies grow.

During the last 10 days before fledging, the hatchlings are nearly as large as adult birds and spend time flapping their wings and balancing on the edge of the nest, preparing to fly. The chicks are about three weeks old in the photo on the left. The photo on the right was taken 14 days later.



At this time of year in the park, Red-shouldered Hawks are often heard as they soar overhead. The most likely places to see one perched would be up in the trees bordering open areas, such as Bay View trail. Bring binoculars. When the Visitor Center is open, you can borrow binoculars with no charge.



Join us for a Virtual Eagle Festival

Saturday, May 8 at 2 PM



Photo by Randy Streufert

Do you want to learn more about Bald Eagles? Join us at 2 PM on Saturday, May 8, when the Friends of Mason Neck State Park will hold a virtual program featuring Buddy the Bald Eagle. Buddy has appeared at several previous Eagle Festivals. This year, Alex Wehrung, the Outreach Coordinator for the Wildlife Center of Virginia and Buddy's principal handler and trainer, will join us in a Zoom-based program during which he will show Buddy live and on-camera while he discusses the lives of Bald Eagles. The Friends of Mason Neck State Park are presenting this program without charge thanks the generosity of our members and donors. You can register for this program [here](#).

Chick O'Dee Answers your Mason Neck State Park Critter Questions



Eight-year old Pamela recently asked: I've noticed that a lot of birds look so much bigger in the winter. Did they have to eat a lot in the fall to prepare for times when there's less food around?

Chick O'Dee replies: Pamela, What a great question and very thoughtful reasoning. But no, that's not why. The birds that look bigger have fluffed up their inner feathers to stay warmer. By fluffing them up, they create more pockets of air between their skin and their outer feathers. The trapped air acts as insulation and reduces heat loss. It's the same effect you get when you put on an extra layer of clothing. Here are two of my friends demonstrating their winter fluffed look.



Brittany Bluebird and Charlie Cardinal

Have a question for Chick? You can send us your inquiry [here](#) and we'll do our best to answer it in our next newsletter.

Please Help Us Support Mason Neck State Park!

If you are already a member of the Friends of Mason Neck State Park, **Thank You!** Your membership dues and donations help us to support the Park's activities, and also enable us to fund special events such as our Owl Moon evening each fall and the annual Swanfall Holiday Program at the Jammes House each December. We've had to suspend our in-person activities for the past few months, but we're having on-line programs instead.

If you aren't a member, or your membership has lapsed, you can become a member at [Join the Friends of Mason Neck State Park](#).

You can also donate to the Friends [here](#).