**Virginia Master Naturalist Program**

**Project Proposal Form**

*Project proposals should be completed by partner organizations or chapter members and submitted to the chapter’s Board of Directors for review. Projects will be evaluated for relevance to program mission and objectives. Projects and activities implemented without approval are not considered Virginia Master Naturalist activities, do not count towards required service hours, and do not carry the liability shield.*

**Project Name** *(For approval and recording purposes)*: Virginia Bird and Wildlife Trail Site Visits

**Submitted By:** Michelle Prysby, VMN Program Director **Phone or Email Contact:** mprysby@vt.edu

**Project Purpose and Value** *(How will this project contribute to natural resource management, conservation, or education?)*:

The purpose of this project is to improve the Virginia Bird and Wildlife Trail (VBWT) by:

* regularly adding bird and wildlife observations to eBird and iNaturalist for each site
* reviewing VBWT loop pages to ensure they are relevant to the area
* documenting site accessibility
* collecting other site information on an as-needed basis

The data collected and the efforts of the volunteers will help the Department of Wildlife Resources (DWR) ensure that the VBWT remains a high quality, reliable, relevant, and highly visible Trail program. Furthermore, the bird and wildlife observational data entered into eBird and iNaturalist by project participants will improve public knowledge regarding known observable species available for each site. Likewise, the observational data entered into these platforms will also help the DWR ensure that descriptions of the VBWT’s loops and sites are accurately described in terms of potential wildlife sightings in those areas. Finally, this project data may also help individual VBWT site managers and owners to make more informed management decisions and/or aid them in their educational programming.

**Project type** *(Is this project education/outreach, citizen science/monitoring, stewardship, or administrative?)*:

Citizen science/monitoring

**Project Description** *(Describe what the project involves. What will participants actually do?)*:

* At least one participant per chapter is needed to be the VBWT Site Visit Project Liaison. This person serves as the main point of contact for chapter members and as the point of contact for DWR, should the agency need to contact the chapter about something relating to VBWT loop(s) in their area. The liaison should:
	+ help identify which chapter members are visiting which sites
	+ communicate with site managers/owners, if there are significant site issues to report (such as a new invasive species at the site or safety concerns)
	+ contact DWR Watchable Wildlife Biologists if there are very serious concerns that cannot be addressed with the site managers and could warrant removal from the Trail
		- examples include: repeated attempts to contact the manager have failed or been unproductive) or to inform DWR of a major change at the site (such as a change in the site’s name, the site is closed and no longer open to the public, or the site has a new main entrance/access point)

The liaison can choose the degree of organization they wish to have for the activity. For example, some liaisons may wish to have a schedule through which volunteers sign up to visit sites at different times. Other liaisons may prefer to simply assign volunteers to sites and let them determine on their own when to visit. Some liaisons may conduct site visits as a group event.

Note that if your chapter is also participating in the VBWT Education and Outreach Project, chapters can choose whether or not they would like one person to function in both liaison positions, or have different liaisons for each project.

* Additional chapter members may participate in any or all of the following aspects of the activity:
	+ Visit VBWT sites in the chapter’s area to observe birds and wildlife, and then reporting observations via eBird and the Virginia Wildlife Mapping iNaturalist project.
		- These visits should be made at least once per year and may be made up to once per month for the purposes of this activity. Additional bird and wildlife data (more than once per month) is of less use to DWR, so we do not want to encourage volunteers to use their service time that way.
		- While visiting, if a volunteer notices any significant issues at the site (e.g., trails are blocked, parking lot is blocked, safety concerns), they should document it with photos and/or notes and let the chapter’s VBWT Site Visit Liaison for their chapter know.
	+ Submit an accessibility report about sites on the chapter’s adopted VBWT loop that meets the following two conditions; 1. site meets the criteria set by Birdability to be included as an accessible site on their interactive map and 2. the site is currently denoted as being “accessible” in the VBWT online guide facilities list.
		- The information in these reports will help the DWR to provide more detailed accessibility information on its “accessible” VBWT sites for users. Additionally, it will help ensure placement of accessible VBWT sites on the Birdability map.
	+ Review DWR’s draft content for its updated VBWT loop web pages to help ensure that these new pages contain accurate and user-friendly information that matches on-the-ground conditions.

**Project Location** *(Where will this project take place?)*:

Volunteers are needed throughout the Commonwealth. At this time, this activity is only available to VMN chapters that have previously adopted VBWT loops, and those chapters, should they choose to do this activity, should focus on their adopted loops. Bird and wildlife observations will be conducted remotely, outdoors at VBWT sites. Data entry and communications with other volunteers and site managers will be conducted either on site using a smart phone or at home using a computer. Additional chapter participation will be welcome following an evaluation of loops which were not previously adopted via the now completed VBWT Adopt-a-Trail project.

**Time Frame** *(What, if any, is the time frame for this project? Be as specific as possible –What time does the volunteer need to be there and how late are they expected to stay? If it is seasonal, what are the approximate dates or appropriate weather conditions? Is this an on-going project or does it have a fixed end date? About how many hours can a volunteer expect to put into this project?)*:

This is an ongoing activity with no fixed end date.

* The Liaison should expect to spend several hours annually organizing the other chapter volunteers.
* The number of visits per site may be determined by the participating volunteers and may range from once per month to once per year. The timing of any visit should match the type of wildlife the volunteer is intending to observe and document during that visit. For bird observations, it is preferred that sites be visited in the morning hours, starting before 10:00 am. However, volunteers might also choose to conduct additional site visits to document other species, and the timing of those visits should align with the best times to observe that kind of wildlife (e.g., warmer, sunnier part of day for butterflies.)
* Participating volunteers will spend variable amounts of time per site visit, depending on how large the site is. For a site with no hiking trails, 30-45 minutes should be sufficient (20 minutes of bird and wildlife observation, plus time to report the observations. For sites with trails, volunteers likely will want to walk at least one of the available trails, which could take 1-4 hours. For very large sites with multiple trails or numerous miles of trails, we suggest alternating which portions of the site you visit each time.

**Partner Contact** *(If a partner is involved, who at that organization is the contact for this project?)*:

**Name:** Jessica Ruthenberg

**Organization:** Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources

**Phone numbers:** 804-229-2556

**Email:** Jessica.ruthenberg@dwr.virginia.gov

**Project Chair** *(Who from the chapter is the contact person and organizer for this project?)*:

**What, if any, prior experience or expertise is required or preferred?**

* Basic knowledge of Virginia’s birds and some experience identifying them. (Birders are highly desirable, but not required.)
* Ability and desire to hike nature trails.
* Access to a computer or smart phone with internet
* Familiarity with the eBird and iNaturalist websites is desirable, but not required.
* Independent worker who is self-motivated.
* Attention to detail.
* Access to a digital camera or camera phone to take photos on-site is helpful, but not required.
* Liaison: Strong verbal communication skills for communicating with VBWT site owners/staff and fellow volunteers, and strong organizations skills to assist with delegation of site observations.

**What training will be provided and by whom?**

Videos showing how to use iNaturalist and eBird are available on the VMN website at <http://www.virginiamasternaturalist.org/virginia-bird-and-wildlife-trail-adoption.html>. Additional instructions for the Birdability aspect of the activity will be available in summer 2023.

**Resources provided** *(What equipment or other resources will be provided for the volunteer(s)?)*:

Online information about all of the VBWT loops and sites is available at <https://dwr.virginia.gov/vbwt/>.

**Resources needed** *(What will the volunteer(s) or chapter need to provide and how will these resources be acquired?)*:

* Volunteers will need to create free accounts with eBird, and iNaturalist for data submission purposes.
* Binoculars for wildlife viewing.
* Optional: printer, clipboard, writing utensil if you wish to print datasheets and complete them on site as opposed to electronically.
* Optional: a smartphone or digital camera to photograph any site issues best described by a visual

**Safety hazards and protocols** *(What hazards might the volunteers encounter and what safety protocols should be followed?)*:

* A water bottle, sunscreen, long pants, a hat, bug spray (as needed), tall socks, and comfortable/ sturdy shoes are all encouraged for safety while hiking in natural areas.
* Volunteers responsible for visiting any privately owned sites are encouraged to reach out to the site contact in advance, so that they have advance notice of their visit.
* Volunteers should review the Safety and Risk Management for Virginia Master Naturalist volunteers document, particularly the sections relating to general personal protection, weather and environmental hazards, contact with plants and wildlife, field etiquette/rules/laws, and information/protocols/scientific integrity.

**Are minors involved?** *(If yes, then all volunteers must be trained in working with youth and the Above Suspicion policy.)* **NO**

**How will the project be evaluated during implementation and after completion?**

Liaisons may be asked to complete an annual survey or submit information to DWR about their chapters participation in the project to gauge project success.

**How will the Virginia Master Naturalist program be recognized?**

The adopting VMN chapter and appropriate hyperlinks to the chapter will be posted on the loop landing page for the adopted loop/s.

**How will volunteers benefit from participation in the project?**

This project offers volunteers an opportunity to become more connected not only with DWR but also with the VBWT sites in the area. This project also presents volunteers with an opportunity to hone their wildlife and plant identification skills. Volunteers will also help to improve a valuable statewide ecotourism resource for birders, wildlife viewers, hikers, and nature enthusiasts. Finally, for volunteers looking to develop impactful stewardship projects in their local communities, this project serves as a great networking opportunity for volunteers and site representatives.

*For Chapter Board of Directors Only: Project approved? YES NO Date of approval:*