Virginia Birding & Wildlife Trail
Adopt-A-Trail Project

Jessica Ruthenberg, Watchable Wildlife Biologist
Training Overview

I. Intro to DGIF & Watchable Wildlife

II. Virginia Birding & Wildlife Trail
   a) Overview & Background
   b) Current status

III. Adopt – A –Trail Project
   a) Overview
   b) Current Status
   c) Getting Your Chapter Started
   d) How to do it
   e) Outcomes & Initial Results

IV. Questions
Virginia Department of Game & Inland Fisheries

CONSERVE. CONNECT. PROTECT.

Vision:

Leading wildlife conservation & inspiring people to value the outdoors and their role in nature.

Mission:

• Conserve & manage wildlife populations and habitat for the benefit of present and future generations.

• Connect people to Virginia’s outdoors through boating, education, fishing, hunting, trapping, wildlife viewing, and other wildlife-related activities.

• Protect people and property by promoting safe outdoor experiences and managing human-wildlife conflicts.
DGIF Watchable Wildlife Program

What
Promote, provide, & enhance opportunities for wildlife viewing

Why
Foster appreciation & support for conservation of wildlife and habitats

DGIF.Virginia.gov/WildlifeWatching

blog.wildlife.virginia.gov/falcon-cam/
Virginia Birding & Wildlife Trail

Goal:
Increase awareness, appreciation and conservation of Virginia’s wildlife and native habitats.

Objectives:
• Promote wildlife watching as a recreational activity in Virginia.
• Demonstrate the economic value of wildlife through ecotourism $.
Virginia Birding & Wildlife Trail

A **statewide** network of viewing sites that are the best places in VA to see birds and wildlife

- **640 Individual Viewing Sites** (and still growing!)
- **Sites include**: parks & nature trails, kayak/canoe launches (for viewing on the water), scenic overlooks, historic sites, plantations, bed & breakfasts, and more!
- Sites are marked with **VBWT-logo signage**
- Organized into **65 Trail Loops** (clusters of viewing sites suggested as trip itineraries – originally designed to be explored over 2-3 days, driving site-to-site)
- **Trail Guide available online** in 2 formats – VBWT Website & Find Wildlife Website (previously was available in hard copy)
Virginia Birding & Wildlife Trail

History of the Trail

Was the 1st Statewide Birding & Wildlife Trail in the U.S.!

Completed in 3 Phases between 1999 - 2004:

1st) Coastal: 2002
2nd) Mountain: 2003
3rd) Piedmont: 2004

Funding:

- Initial planning supported by VDGIF’s Non-Game Fund
- Support for all 3 development phases was provided by:
Virginia Birding & Wildlife Trail
DGIF’s Role Over the Years:
Maintain and Coordinate the VBWT as a Whole

- Produced a series of guide books (newest in 2006)
- Developed series of marketing materials (brochures)
- Developed a website: DGIF.Virginia.gov/VBWT
- Continued to assess applications for new sites and coordinate with the site to establish them on the trail
- Assisted with site enhancements – technical assistance &/or funding for
  - Viewing Structures
  - Trails
  - Habitat Improvements
  - Interpretive Signage
- Conducted a formal assessment (2008)
- Added e-Bird links for each site on website (2009)
- Maintained VBWT signage as aware (over 1,400 signs)
- Addressed questions and concerns as aware of them
Virginia Birding & Wildlife Trail

After 13-15 Years, the VBWT is in Need of Extra Attention

Areas of Opportunity

• Update Descriptions and Contact Info – Many site descriptions outdated and site contacts and websites have changed unknowingly over time
• Replace Signage – old signage; some faded, damaged, or missing
• Increase & Revive Promotion – promotion from tourism agencies dwindled over time
• Increase Public Engagement & Awareness – we want more Virginians and tourists aware of the VBWT and using it!
• Increase Communication with Site Owners/Managers - waned over time
• Update Website Design – The NEW Find Wildlife website and recent agency-wide website overhaul is a great start, but more to be done!
• Update Driving Directions Format – The NEW Find Wildlife website is a start towards improvement!, but more to be done on DGIF website.
• Complete and Improve E-bird Links - Not all sites have e-Bird lists; some lesser known sites appear to have very few observations entered
• Possibly create a new print guide book to the VBWT? (TBD)

With **640 Sites Statewide** and **1.25 DGIF Staff to work on**, we need assistance!
Adopt –A–Trail Project
A Partnership between DGIF and the VMN Program
to Improve and Maintain the VBWT

Phase I Project Overview:

• VMN Chapters adopt their local VBWT loop(s) and select an AAT Coordinator for their chapter

• AAT Coordinators recruit chapter members to adopt individual sites along their chapter’s loop(s).

• Participating members conduct visits to each site 1-4 times per year, depending on number of loops adopted, loop size and membership numbers

• Complete a checklist of tasks at each site visit:
  ✓ Verify guide info – site info, description, directions
  ✓ Record condition of VBWT Signage
  ✓ Record major access issues/ “red flags”
  ✓ Bird the site and record observations in eBird
  ✓ Record any photographable wildlife observations in VA Wildlife Mapping Project (iNaturalist)

• Communicate with site owners / managers – only once per year; checklist provides talking points

• Submit checklists back to DGIF – 1 per year
Adopt –A-Trail Project Status

• Launched Project in March 2016
• As of Sept. 2017:
  ▪ **15** of 30 (50%) VMN Chapters are Participating
  ▪ **21** of 65 (30%) Trail Loops are being monitored
  ▪ >**200** VMN members are involved

Headwaters Chapter Gathered for Orientation to a VBWT Site

Pocahontas Chapter Member Conducting a Site Visit
Adopt –A–Trail Project

Getting Your Chapter Started

• As a Chapter, decide what Loop(s) to Adopt.

• Choose an AAT Project Coordinator for your Chapter
  – Is the point-of-contact for your chapter’s AAT participants.
  – Is DGIF’s point-of-contact/ liaison with your chapter.
  – Organizes a site adoption sign-up process (eg. signupgenius.com) and recruits participants
  – Sets the chapter’s internal deadlines for completion of site visits.
  – Keeps track of site visit progress and sends reminders to participants.
  – Gathers all site visit checklists (or other requested info) and submits them back to DGIF.
  – At the conclusion of each calendar year, submits a project wrap-up report to DGIF. (A form for this report will be provided.)

• Inform DGIF of your Chapter’s Decision to Participate.
  – Need to know:
    1) which loop(s) the chapter is adopting
    2) coordinator’s name and contact info
    3) any other VMN chapters or Audubon chapters that may be assisting on this loop
    4) if adopting multiple loops, which loop will be completed each season.

• Make AAT an official VMN Project for your Chapter.
Adopt –A–Trail Project

Step 1: Chapter Decides which loop(s) to Adopt

Step 2: Chapter Selects a Coordinator

Step 3: Chapter Volunteers Sign Up for the Individual Sites They Want to Adopt
1. Visit the VBWT website. DGIF.Virginia.gov/VBWT
   • Find the VBWT webpage for your assigned site to learn about it.
   • Click on the “website” link to visit the site’s own website. (Note: may be outdated, so may require detective work to find)
   • Print a copy of the site’s VBWT webpage.
## Adopt -A-Trail Project – Phase I

VBWT Web Site: [DGIF.Virginia.gov/VBWT](http://DGIF.Virginia.gov/VBWT)

### Bird Observations

**For Change Location:**
- Smith Mountain Lake State Park

95 species (+1 other taxa)

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**Date Range:**
- 1/1 - 12/31, 1900-2015 Combine Years

### Directions

- From Smith Mountain Lake State Park, take the parking lot access road and follow signs.
- Proceed north on Smith Mountain Lake Road.
- Take a right onto Rt. 600 and continue 2 miles north to a “Y” intersection.
- Take the left fork onto Smith Mountain Road.
- Continue for another mile and take a right onto Smith Mountain Lake Road.
- Follow Smith Mountain Lake Road to the parking area at the dam.

**Contact:**
- (540) 297-6086
- ft@dcr.virginia.gov

**Information:**
- report Bird Observations
  - Checklist & Submit

**Access:**
- Trails
  - Handicap Accessible
- Visitor Information
  - Interpretive Nature Program
  - Interpretive Trail System

**Environment:**
- Birding Area
  - Environmental Study Area
- Accessible Trails
  - Visitor Information
  - Interpretive Nature Program
  - Interpretive Trail System
1. Visit the VBWT website. DGIF.Virginia.gov/VBWT
   • Find the VBWT webpage for your assigned site to learn about it.
   • Click on the “website” link to visit the site’s own website. (Note: may be outdated, so may require detective work to find)
   • Print a copy of the site’s VBWT webpage.

   • Print a site visit checklist
   • Print a car window sign.
Adopt –A–Trail Project – Phase I
How to Prepare for a Site Visit

1. Visit the VBWT website. DGIF.Virginia.gov/VBWT
   • Find the VBWT webpage for your assigned site to learn about it.
   • Click on the “website” link to visit the site’s own website. (Note: may be outdated, so may require detective work to find)
   • Print a copy of the site’s VBWT webpage.

   • Print a site visit checklist
   • Print a car window sign.

3. Reach out to the site contact to arrange a meeting time or phone call. Talking points are provided on the checklist. (OK to do all this over email)
   • If the site is privately owned, verify that the owner is aware their property is a VBWT site.
   • NOTE: Sometimes the contact info online can be outdated and this WILL REQUIRE DETECTIVE WORK to find the appropriate contact.
1. Visit the VBWT website. DGIF.Virginia.gov/VBWT
   • Find the VBWT webpage for your assigned site to learn about it.
   • Click on the “website” link to visit the site’s own website. (Note: may be outdated, so may require detective work to find)
   • Print a copy of the site’s VBWT webpage.

2. Visit the Adopt–A–Trail Project page on the VMN website.
   virginiamasternaturalist.org/virginia-birding-and-wildlife-trail-adoption
   • Print a site visit checklist
   • Print a car window sign.

3. Reach out to the site contact to arrange a meeting time or phone call. Talking points are provided on the checklist. (Email is ok)
   • If the site is privately owned, verify that the owner is aware their property is a VBWT site.
   • NOTE: Sometimes the contact info online can be outdated and this will require detective work to find the appropriate contact.

4. Create accounts in eBird (ebird.org) and iNaturalist (iNaturalist.org).
   (Optional: Download smartphone apps for eBird and iNaturalist.)
Adopt –A–Trail Project – Phase I
How to Set Up an eBird Account

1. Go to the website: ebird.org
2. Click on “My eBird” tab to create an account.
3. Familiarize yourself with the website.
4. Optional: To download the free eBird app, go to your smartphone’s App Store/ Google Play and search for “eBird.” The app is by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Click on “get” or “download” to install the app to your phone.
Adopt –A–Trail Project – Phase I

How to Set up an iNaturalist Account

1. Go to the website: inaturalist.org
2. Click on “Sign up” to create an account.
3. Click on “Projects” and enter “Virginia Wildlife Mapping” into the “Search” bar.
4. Click on “Virginia Wildlife Mapping” to view our project. This is where you will add your observations. Direct link: inaturalist.org/projects/virginia-wildlife-mapping
5. Familiarize yourself with the website.
6. Optional: To download the free iNaturalist app, go to your smartphone’s App Store/Google Play and search for “iNaturalist.” The app is by iNaturalist, LLC. Click on “get” or “download” to install the app.
7. Remember, always enter your observations into the “Virginia Wildlife Mapping” project, otherwise DGIF will not have access to your observations.
1. Visit the VBWT website. DGIF.Virginia.gov/VBWT
   • Find the VBWT webpage for your assigned site to learn about it.
   • Click on the “website” link to visit the site’s own website. (Note: may be outdated, so may require detective work to find)
   • Print a copy of the site’s VBWT webpage.

   • Print a site visit checklist
   • Print a car window sign.

3. Reach out to the site contact to arrange a meeting time or phone call. Talking points are provided on the checklist.
   • If the site is privately owned, verify that the owner is aware their property is a VBWT site.
   • NOTE: Sometimes the contact info online can be outdated and this will require detective work to find the appropriate contact.

4. Create accounts in eBird (ebird.org) and iNaturalist (iNaturalist.org).
   Optional: Download smartphone apps for eBird and iNaturalist.

5. Optional: Visit the Find Wildlife website: vafwis.dgif.virginia.gov/FindWildlifeVA/#/findWildlife
   Can be used to map directions from any location to your site(s).
Adopt –A–Trail Project – Phase I
How to Conduct a Site Visit

1. Bring:
   - A printed copy of your site’s webpage on the VBWT website.
   - Digital camera or smartphone
   - Recommended: binoculars, bird guide, pocket size note pad.
   - Optional: smartphone with ebird and iNaturalist apps installed
   - Writing utensil and clipboard.
   - Personal Items for the Outdoors: Water, snacks, sunscreen, and weather-appropriate clothing.

2. Complete all items on the checklist.
   Note: Time spent will vary based on the type and size of site. Generally, a site visit should approximate how long an ordinary visitor may spend at the site to bird it and observe wildlife, plus ~15 min to complete the checklist and an additional ~15 min if you are having your meeting with the manager at that time.
Adopt –A–Trail Project – Phase I
How to Conduct a Site Visit

2. VBWT Guide/Website Verification (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VBWT Guide/Website Feature</th>
<th>Accurate?</th>
<th>Suggested Corrections/Updates – Please write the correction as it should be in the guide/VBWT site webpage</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Driving directions to site</td>
<td>Y or N</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Map of the Loop, Location of Site on the map, and Location of Site in Google Map window (on website)</td>
<td>Y or N</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>List of Site Facilities</td>
<td>Y or N</td>
<td>Facilities to be cut:</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Facilities to be added:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continue to next page →)
Adopt –A–Trail Project – Phase I
How to Conduct a Site Visit

4. Public Access Issues. If you observed any MAJOR access issues at this site (e.g., looks unsafe, not open to the public, “No Trespassing” signs were posted, owner indicates they no longer want to participate in the VBWT, etc.), please describe.

Visit the VBWT webpage for this site and click on the e-Bird link on the right-hand side of the webpage to record your observations. If a link is not provided, do a “hotspot” search on the E-Bird website at ebird.org/hotspot to see if one already exists in their system. If one does not already exist, please create a “personal site” with the site name used in the guide/ VBWT website: e.g., Belle Isle State Park.
- Does this site’s webpage on the VBWT website have an e-Bird link? Yes / No
- If NO, but e-Bird has an existing “hotspot.” please provide the hotspot name in the space below, so DGIF can add it to the VBWT webpage. Hotspot Name:

Document these wildlife observations by digital photo or sound recording and upload those into the iNaturalist
iNaturalist.org projects/virginia-wildlife-mapping or by using the downloadable iNaturalist mobile app and choose Virginia Wildlife Mapping as the project.
Completed? Circle: yes or no

Thank you for your assessment and data collection! Your responses will help DGIF improve the VBWT and contribute data to the Virginia Species Observations database and a new Virginia Herp Atlas.

Please submit this completed form to your Chapter’s Adopt-A-Trail Project Coordinator. Your Coordinator will compile this information with that collected at the other trail sites on your Chapter’s loop(s) and submit everything back to DGIF.

NOTE: Forms only need to be turned in when there is something new to add for Questions 1 – 4. On re-visits, you will largely be going to observe birds and wildlife and enter data for questions 5-6 into eBird and the Virginia Wildlife Mapping Project on iNaturalist.
1. Enter your bird observations in eBird. (If not done so already, with the app.)

   • Reminders:
     – Use the same hotspot as used on the VBWT webpage for your site. You can find the hotspot by using the eBird links on your site’s VBWT webpage.
     – If there is no eBird link on the site’s VBWT webpage, follow the checklist instructions for how to enter the data.

   • Respond to the eBird questions on the checklist.
2. Enter your wildlife observations into iNaturalist. (If not done so already, with the app.)

1) Upload your wildlife photos onto your computer, so they can be added to your observations.
2) Go to http://www.inaturalist.org/projects/virginia-wildlife-mapping
3) Click on “Add Observations”
4) Click “Choose Files” to select a photo and fill out form for each observation. Tip: Check the box for “sync obs. with metadata.”
5) Name the place where you made your observation, the same as the VBWT site name.
6) Indicate that you completed Wildlife Mapping work on your site visit checklist.
1. Have your meeting, phone call, or email exchange with the site owner/manager using the talking points. (If you have not already done so.)

2. Submit your completed checklist to your Chapter’s Adopt-A-Trail Coordinator.
   - Preferred format is electronic. Can be scanned hard copies or typed directly into the pdf.
   - Name the file in this format: **Site Number_Site Name_Year_Season**
   - Coordinators compile checklists for all sites on the loop together as a set and send back to Jessica at DGIF.
     - Email: jessica.ruthenberg@dgif.virginia.gov
     - Mail: Jessica Ruthenberg, VA Dept. of Game & Inland Fisheries, 3909 Airline Blvd., Chesapeake, VA, 23321
Adopt –A–Trail Project – Phase I & II

What comes after your initial visit?

Single Loop Chapters:

• Continue site visits seasonally
  – Observe Birds ➔ eBird
  – Observe/ Photograph wildlife ➔ iNaturalist
  – Report major public access issues to chapter’s AAT Coordinator
  – Refer to Phase II instructions, once all items completed for Phase I

• No need to keep contacting the site owner/ manager each season! They only need to be contacted once a year. (perhaps only once every other year)
Multiple Loop Chapters:

• Rotate to your next loop (or loop section) each season to complete initial, full Phase I site visits over the course of the project year.
  - Spring ’16 – Loop A  - Spring – Loop X, north
  - Summer ’16 – Loop B  - Summer – Loop X, south
  - Fall ‘16 – Loop C  - Fall – Loop X, north
  - Winter ‘16/’17 – Loop A  - Winter – Loop X, south
  - Spring ’17 – Loop B  - Spring – Loop X, south
  - Summer ’17 – Loop C  - Summer – Loop X, north
  - Fall ‘17 – Loop A
  - Winter ‘17/’18 – Loop B
  - Spring ’18 – Loop C

• By rotating multiple loops through the seasons, they will all be visited in each season after 2-3 year’s time (depending on number of loops adopted).

• Once the cycle repeats – refer to Phase II instructions
Adopt –A–Trail Project – Phase I & II

Timeline

Coordinators Submit All Completed Phase I Checklists, as a set, to DGIF by: December 31st
(or sooner if available)

Seasonal monitoring (wildlife observation) deadlines:

- Spring – June 30th
- Summer – September 30th
- Fall – December 31st
- Winter – March 31st

*Remember - Chapters must notify DGIF (Jessica Ruthenberg) of their commitment to Adopt-A-Trail before starting the project.
Many positive outcomes are possible!

**Citizen Science:**
eBird data used by DGIF and bird biologists world-wide as well as VBWT travelers

**VA Wildlife Mapping data** will be used in Wildlife Observation Database and Virginia Herp Atlas

**VBWT Guide Maintenance:**
DGIF will update the VBWT and Find Wildlife websites

**Signage Maintenance:**
DGIF will document and resupply signs where needed

**Relationship Building:**
VMNs & DGIF ↔ site contacts
VMNs → VBWT
VMNs ↔ DGIF

**VBWT Improvements:**
DGIF will follow up on any MAJOR concerns with site contacts
Site Contacts will be reminded their site is part of the VBWT → improved communication with DGIF and visitors about VBWT
Potential for On-site Volunteer Projects – Remember: 1st Ask site contact what would be helpful

**A High Quality VBWT**

**Positive Visitor Experience**

**Meet the Goals of the VBWT**
Results So Far

As of September 2017:

170 individual VBWT sites (>25% of all sites) to date

- have had their webpage information updated/improved on the DGIF website as a result of this project
- have had their signage needs documented – will assist in their eventual replacement
- Addition of physical addresses and revision to direction format in progress

~ 100 sites’ managers/owners were communicated with
  - many provided helpful feedback back about ways to improve
  - good reminder to them that they participate
  - many revised description details
  - some requested signs right away – these have been sent

5 sites have been removed from VBWT – a good thing

1 new sites has been nominated – also a good thing
More Results: Increase in Promotion

A Major Piece of Feedback Received from 1st Year of Project was that the VBWT Needs More Promotion and Marketing

Results:

• **Rack cards at all 12 Virginia Welcome Centers & 75 visitor centers**
• “Go Birding!” postcard with VBWT information
• VBWT ad placed in Blue Ridge Outdoors tourism magazine
• The first in a series of area-specific brochures designed for Virginia Beach area (with printing sponsorship by local Audubon chapters).
• Articles about VBWT in 2 local editions of The Virginian Pilot

An Area of Opportunity for VMNs going forward
What Comes after Phase I & II
Adopt-a-Trail is a Long Term Project

Future Phase: Site Evaluation Survey
Your responses will help DGIF
- Rank Sites – destination (“best bet”) site vs. stop-by if your in the neighborhood
- Determine Top Sites Across VA and in each Region
- Will create a new marketing tool
- May be used to add species data to Find Wildlife; Is your site a “best bet,” “good,” or “available” for viewing warblers?

Future Phases:
• Promotional Efforts?
• Leading Field Trips?
Adopt –A–Trail Project

Questions?