Virginia Birding & Wildlife Trail
Adopt-A-Trail Project
FAQs

1. **VBWT lingo - What is a "Loop" versus a "Trail" versus a "Site?"**

   The entire Virginia Birding & Wildlife Trail is referred to as a "Trail." It was originally designed as a statewide driving trail for people to drive from site-to-site, where people would get out at each site and spend some time birding/ viewing wildlife there and then drive to the next site. It is organized into a trail system of 65 separate "Loops." It was originally envisioned that people would choose a "loop" to visit, as a vacation, and spend 2-3 days visiting each of the sites on that loop and staying at local lodging along the way. Each numbered stop along a loop is referred to as a "Site." Each "site" has its own webpage on the DGIF website with a description, directions, and contact information. Sites vary greatly; they may be on public land or privately-owned property. They may be a park, a historic site, a kayak/canoe launch, a driving tour, a roadside stop or scenic overlook. Note: Not all sites have hiking trails available (although most do); eg. the boat ramps and kayak/canoe launches are intended for people to view wildlife on the water.

2. **Do we have to visit all sites on all loops that we adopt 4 times per year or is there some flexibility?**

   Yes, there is some flexibility. The layout of each loop of the VBWT is unique and the way that each of the loops overlap with a Virginia Master Naturalist (VMN) Chapter Area is also unique, so some chapters may need to approach the project different than others. Here are a few options to consider.

   - If your chapter is only adopting 1 loop, ideally we would like for all of its sites to be visited 4 times per year. This allows for bird and wildlife observation data to be collected in each season at each of the sites. It also will provide the adopter of the site to really become familiar with the seasonal dynamics of the site.
   - If your chapter is adopting more than 1 loop, it is possible to rotate which loops you visit on a seasonal basis. For example if your chapter were to adopt loops A, B, and C you could follow the example schedule below, in which your chapter is only responsible for visiting sites on 1 loop each season, but over time will have data for all 3 loops in every season.

Spring 2016 – Loop A	Spring 2017 – Loop B
Summer 2016 – Loop B	Summer 2017 – Loop C
Fall 2016 – Loop C	Fall 2017 – Loop A
Winter 2016/ 2017 – Loop A	Winter 2017/ 2018 – Loop B

     It would be the responsibility of your chapter's Adopt-A-Trail (AAT) Project Coordinator to keep track of which loops will be visited during which season and to communicate this schedule to participating chapter members.
   - If you have adopted just 1 loop and it happens to be an extraordinarily long loop covering multiple counties / great distances and your chapter doesn't have the membership or participation to cover a loop of that size/ distance, you could split that loop up into sections, eg. north and south or east and west, etc., and do a seasonal rotation of those sections. See example below.

Spring 2016 – Loop X, north	Spring 2017 – Loop X, south
Summer 2016 – Loop X, south	Summer 2017 – Loop X, north
Fall 2016 – Loop X, north	Fall 2017 – Loop X, south
Winter 2016/ 2017 – Loop X, south	Winter 2017/ 2018 – Loop X, north

Again, it would be the responsibility of your chapter's AAT Project Coordinator to keep track of which sections of the loop will be visited during which season and to communicate this schedule to participating chapter members.

3. **Can we just adopt a couple of sites nearest where our members live, rather than adopting a whole loop?**

   Our preference is for chapters to adopt an entire loop, rather than individual sites. However, there is flexibility in how you approach the site visits (see options provided in response to question 2).

4. **Do we have to do the Wildlife Mapping component of the project? It seems too time consuming and/or we don't have the expertise to identify everything.**

   It is ok to opt out of that part, but it is very likely something that your members will find they will enjoy, if they are willing to give it a try. Here is some more explanation on what we are expecting of this project component.

   Basically, all we are asking for Adopt A Trail participants to do with Wildlife Mapping is this: As you are hiking a trail at your VBWT site to assess the site, please be on the lookout for birds and other wildlife and ready to snap a photo of what you observe and upload your photo to our Virginia Wildlife Mapping Project on iNaturalist. (This can be done very efficiently with a smartphone and the iNaturalist app; alternatively, it can be done with a digital camera and then uploaded later to the iNaturalist website on a home computer). We are simply asking that if you observe birds and other wildlife (particularly a reptile or amphibian) at the site and can get a photo of it, please do so, and then enter it into our Wildlife Mapping project on iNaturalist. Please know that with the Wildlife Mapping component, we are NOT asking for folks to do a thorough wildlife survey or bioblitz of the site. We want you to observe wildlife at the site as an ordinary visitor would, so please stay on marked trails. While any wildlife species can be entered into iNaturalist that people want to, they do NOT have to cover everything. Our primary interest with Wildlife Mapping is to collect observations of reptiles and amphibians and we want it to be fun and easy for people to do. There are no firm scientific protocols to follow. The only requirement is a photo or sound recording to go along with your observation entry. The data collected contributes data to our agency's larger wildlife observation database and to the Virginia Herp Atlas, so by participating in this component of the AAT project, your chapter members will be making a valuable contribution to wildlife conservation efforts in Virginia.

   The nice thing about using iNaturalist for Wildlife Mapping, is that you do not have to be a wildlife identification expert. For any photo you upload and you aren't sure what species it is, just make your best guess at it, use the iNaturalist "identotron" tool which provides suggestions, or leave it blank. If you leave it blank, "iNaturalist" will identify it as "Something" and note that it "Needs ID." Other people who participate in iNaturalist and Virginia Wildlife Mapping, including DGIF biologists, will help identify the species in your photo. This offers an opportunity to learn how to identify species.

5. **Do you have to be a birding expert to participate?**
   While experienced birders are highly desirable for this project, it is not a requirement. Birders of all levels are encouraged to participate. Similar to the Wildlife Mapping component of the project, we are just looking for trail adopters to do their best to identify the birds they see at the site and to report those observations to e-Bird.

6. **One of the sites on our loop contains numerous miles of trails. Do we have to hike all of them?**

No, you do not have to hike every single trail at an adopted site, particularly at the very large sites containing numerous miles of trails. There are a few ways to approach sites like this and it is up to your chapter how you want to handle it. You could organize a small team of chapter members to the site, so that way the trails can be divided up amongst team members. You also could choose which trail to focus on based on reading the site's description on the VBWT website and/or the site's own website, which oftentimes will mention a trail that is specifically good for birding or have a map showing where viewing platforms/ blinds/ towers may be and those locations would be key places to focus your visit on. Also, another option, since this is a long term project, the individual or team could try hiking a different trail at each seasonal visit to that site and eventually, over time they will have hiked all of the trails.

7. **I visited a site and it did not have a hiking trail. Aren't all of the sites supposed to have trails?**

Many VBWT sites have trails/ paths to walk/hike, but there are also many that do not. VBWT sites vary greatly. Some VBWT sites are just an overlook, a stop on a side of the road, a bridge, or a pier. Sites like this are intended to be a quick stop by. Other sites are a boat ramp or kayak/ canoe launch and are intended to either be a quick stop by at that ramp or are intended for visitors to launch a kayak/canoe and view birds and wildlife by boat while on the water. Other sites will have 1-2 hikable trails while other sites will have miles of hiking trails. Although the name "Virginia Birding & Wildlife Trail" implies that the whole thing is a walkable/ hikable trail the "Trail" part of the name is really referring to the whole trail system and the fact that it is a *driving trail* that one follows driving from site-to-site.

8. **Are we allowed to visit/adopt sites that are not in our chapter's official area?**

Yes, you certainly can, and in many cases will need to travel outside of your chapter's official area because in most cases, the trail loops don't fall perfectly within a chapter's given area. However, in effort to not duplicate the efforts of another chapter, please always check back with DGIF before taking on a new adopted loop that it is not already being covered by another chapter. That is particularly important for those chapters who are very close to one another.

9. **One of the loops we've adopted is very large; can we split the loop with another chapter?**

Our first preference is to have only one chapter per VBWT loop. This approach makes it easier to keep track of which chapters are responsible for which loops and streamlines the project paperwork. However, in certain cases, some VBWT loops cover too great of a distance or contain far too many sites for that to be practical, therefore making splitting the loop between two chapters the only reasonable approach. However, even if a loop is shared between 2 chapters, there should always be just one AAT Project Coordinator for the loop. The AAT Project Coordinator of that loop will need to reach out to the other chapter they are interested in working with and recruit their members to work on the loop. That same Coordinator will be responsible for communicating with those members to track their progress and collect their checklists just as they would for the members of their own chapter. DGIF can help to facilitate initial communication between chapters who are interested in sharing a loop, if this is of interest.

10. **Can we partner with a local Audubon chapter or other bird club on this project?**

Absolutely! We would love to have groups like this engage in the VBWT, so getting them involved in your chapter's trail adoption would be a great idea. Coordination of that would be the responsibility of your AAT Project Coordinator. Please note, anyone conducting site visits who is not a VMN member, will not be covered by the VMN liability insurance.

11. Can we adopt additional loops in the future as chapter member interest grows?

Absolutely! Our hope is that chapter members will enjoy participating in this project and find that is a very manageable task. Chapters can adopt a new loop at any time, but need to inform DGIF first and confirm that that loop is still available for adoption, before beginning work on it.

12. I know of a site that would make a great addition to the VBWT. Is it possible to get it added to the VBWT?

It is possible, but there is an evaluation process, which takes some time and the site's owner needs to be interested in participating and ultimately is the one who should nominate the site and complete the application for it. Downloadable nomination forms and the site evaluation process can be found on our VBWT website at https://www.dgif.virginia.gov/vbwt/new-site-nomination/.

13. Does this project involve trail clean-up or other physical maintenance at the site?

No, unlike other Adoption projects you may have heard of, we are not asking you to pick up litter or perform physical trail maintenance. The maintenance involved with this project is about keeping our information updated on VBWT sites for our website and guidebook, making sure VBWT signage is still present at the site and legible, making sure this site should still be a part of the VBWT, and maintaining communications with site owners/ managers.

If your chapter wants to become more involved and volunteer at any of the sites on your adopted VBWT loop to do physical improvements or whatever else you think is needed, you certainly are welcome to do so and we would encourage that. However, please keep in mind that any physical maintenance volunteer efforts at a site must be coordinated with that site's owner/ manager. Should you decide you want to do something like a trail improvement project on a VBWT site, please let DGIF know about it; we'd love to hear what you are up to at your adopted site and may be able to help facilitate an initial discussion about your chapter's volunteer idea with the site's owner/ manager.

14. How much time must be invested during each site visit?

The length of time for site visits will vary for each site depending on how large the site is and how many people you have going to visit it. There is a lot of variation in the size of the VBWT sites. VBWT sites range from large state parks with numerous miles of trails to small urban parks with short walking paths to scenic overlooks at the side of a road and everything in between.

- For a site with no hiking trails, 30 minutes should be sufficient (20 minutes of bird and wildlife observation plus 10 minutes to answer the other checklist questions).
- For sites with hiking trails, we encourage you to hike at least one of the available trails on the site. This could take anywhere from 1 – 4 or more hours, depending on how much time you have/ desire to spend hiking and the length of trail. Basically, we are looking for the trail adopter to visit the site and spend time there in the manner that a visitor traveling the VBWT would.

- For very large sites with several trails and/or numerous miles of trails, see FAQ question 5 for recommendations on how to approach these types of sites in a manageable manner.

In addition to the site visit, there are two other project components that will require time.
- Communication with the site owner/ manager - The actual conversation could be anywhere from 5 -15 minutes, but will likely require advance coordination via phone or email to set up an appointment. The conversation itself can be accomplished at an in-person meeting (during the site visit or at a separately arranged time) or over the phone.
- Data entry into eBird and iNaturalist – Both of these can be done efficiently during the site visit using the eBird and iNaturalist apps, but if you prefer to do them at home, you will need to allow additional time for that. Both websites are very user-friendly. Depending on how many observations you made or photos you have to upload, you can expect to spend about 30 minutes on each website.

15. **Some of the sites on our loop have an entrance/ parking fee. Is there a way to avoid the fees since we are volunteering for DGIF?**

While it may be an expense to pay these fees, please keep in mind that the money collected by these sites is used towards the conservation of wildlife and wildlife habitats as well as the maintenance of these sites, so the fees go towards a good cause and it's a good idea to pay them. Do keep in mind that the vast majority of VBWT sites are not owned by DGIF and we do not have the authority to waive fees at sites we do not own. However, DGIF will arrange an exemption for AAT participants who are visiting DGIF's Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) to conduct an official AAT site visit. For any non-DGIF owned site/ non-WMA site, it's possible that if you communicate with the site owner/ manager prior to your site visit and you explain that you are conducting official business for DGIF that they may be able to arrange some sort of fee waiver for you when you do your site visit or have your meeting with them. A printable sign for your vehicle windshield indicating that you are on "official DGIF volunteer business" will be available for download from the AAT project page on the VMN website. Do keep in mind though, that we can't guarantee that having such a sign will help to get a fee waived or avoid a ticket at fee-based parking areas, but it's available if you think it may help.

16. **What are the responsibilities of the Chapter's Adopt-A-Trail Project Coordinator?**

The Chapter's Adopt-A-Trail Project Coordinator is responsible for the following:
- At the outset, informing DGIF of the following: (1) your chapter's decision to participate in the project, (2) which VBWT loop(s) the chapter is adopting, (3) the coordinator's name and contact information (phone number and email address), (4) any other VMN chapters or Audubon chapters that may be assisting your chapter with its site visits, and (5) if adopting multiple loops, what your long-term schedule for the year will be (ie. which loop will be completed each season).
- Recruiting participants and organizing the sign-up process for your chapter.
- Training participants on the how to do the project.
- Being the point-of-contact for all participants conducting site visits on your chapter's loop(s).

- Being DGIF's point-of-contact/ liaison with your chapter.
- Setting chapter deadlines for completion of site visits and keeping track of site visit progress.
- Gathering all site visit checklists from your chapter's AAT participants and submitting scanned/ electronic copies to DGIF via email.
- At the conclusion of each year, emailing a project summary report to DGIF. A form for this report will be provided.
- Recruiting new chapter members to the project as participants come and go.

For more extensive details on this topic, refer to the "Guidelines & Tips for Chapter Coordinators." It's available for download at virginiamasternaturalist.org/virginia-birding-and-wildlife-trail-adoption.html.