



Audubon Society of Northern Virginia

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June 1, 2017

Mr. William G. Bouie, Chairman
Fairfax County Park Authority Board
Suite 927
12055 Government Center Parkway
Fairfax, VA 22305

Dear Mr. Bouie:

On behalf of the more than 4,300 members of the Audubon Society of Northern Virginia, and on behalf of the American Bird Conservancy and the Northern Virginia Conservation Trust, we are writing to make several recommendations to strengthen your policy addressing the flying of recreational drones, model airplanes, quadcopters and other recreational flying devices in Fairfax County parks. We are also making recommendations on the Laurel Hill/Barrett House site.

Fairfax County is approaching “buildout.” Of 227,337 acres, the county has 6.3 percent “vacant land.” Forests and natural areas have been severely fragmented and biodiversity seriously compromised. Our streams and air quality are degraded. The county has only 14.6 percent of land in parks and recreation, and these are largely not natural areas. Preserving and restoring natural areas are critical ways to reverse these disturbing environmental trends and to have a healthier environment which supports us all.

Overall Policy

We recommend that you establish an overall policy that includes the following steps and criteria:

- As a first step, prepare a comprehensive biological inventory of any area under consideration so that FCPA and the public will understand what natural resources are present in all seasons before allowing the activity or before disturbing the area;
- Prohibit these activities in natural areas or natural resource parks. Maintain and enhance natural areas in our parks.
- If you allow these activities, use already disturbed areas like parking lots or soccer fields when not in use by people.
- Conduct a public process to report on your biological inventory, criteria and options; invite public comment at a public meeting and on any draft plans.
- Support your decisions with science.

Laurel Hill Park

It is our understanding that you are considering allowing some recreational flying activity in a field near Barrett House in Laurel Hill Park.

It is also our understanding that this area is a grassy field that is mowed once a year, in the fall and not during the spring breeding season. There is very little woody plant invasion and only a few shrubs and trees. It appears to be a meadow or grassland area. Northern Virginia has lost most of its grasslands and meadows. Therefore, this is a rare and valuable habitat in the region.

This area has historically been a stopover area for Bobolinks (*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*) and nesting habitat for Eastern Meadowlarks (*Sturnella magna*). There are very few comparable sites left in Northern Virginia that support these two bird species. Migratory Bobolinks have been observed here regularly over the years, including quite a number this spring. On May 9 of this year, meadowlarks were confirmed attempting to breed when one was seen carrying nesting material at the site. Bear in mind that we have experienced a steady regional decline in Eastern Meadowlark observations from 1996 to 2016 (see attached chart based on the Northern Virginia Bird Survey), so any positive signs in Fairfax County should be welcome news. The property no doubt is home to many insect and other wildlife species that cannot survive in other habitat types.

We urge you to –

- conduct a comprehensive biological survey of this property to determine what natural resources are present in all seasons before allowing more recreational activity;
- mow the field, if needed for grassland or meadow management, only after the breeding, nesting and raising of young are completed;
- prohibit active recreational activities, including recreational flying devices, on this property;
- provide an opportunity for the public to comment on any proposed plans; and
- preserve it as natural habitat and consider enhancing it with appropriate native plants.

We would appreciate your sharing this letter with FCPA leadership staff and other members of the Board.

Thank you for considering our recommendations. We look forward to working with you toward a healthier, more sustainable environment in Fairfax County.

Sincerely,



Carl Kikuchi, President
Audubon Society of Northern Virginia

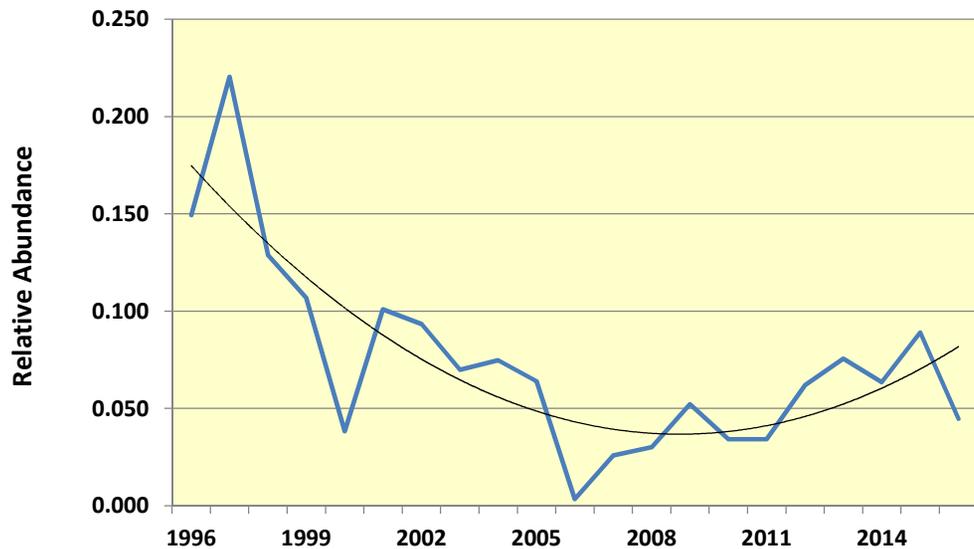


Steve Holmer
Vice President of Policy
American Bird Conservancy



Peggy Stevens
Executive Director
Northern Virginia Conservation Trust

Northern Virginia Bird Survey
Eastern Meadowlark Relative Abundance



Survey Year	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Number of Survey Points	502	458	559	552	576	624	632	587	629	750	599	618	664	652	585	643	629	688	646	663	650
Species Count	75	101	72	59	22	63	59	41	47	48	2	16	20	34	20	22	39	52	41	59	29
Relative Abundance	0.149	0.221	0.129	0.107	0.038	0.101	0.093	0.070	0.075	0.064	0.003	0.026	0.030	0.052	0.034	0.034	0.062	0.076	0.063	0.089	0.045