

Learning Takes Flight at Sylvan Heights Bird Park

Mary Sandkam, Richmond

Originally published in the September-October 2016 issue of [VaHomeschoolers Voice](#).

While the Washington, D.C., and northern Virginia area is home to a treasure trove of amazing field trip opportunities, getting there from anywhere else can often be an experience in frustration. What should be an easy, two-hour drive from my home base of Richmond can often turn into a three-hour (or more!) nightmare of congestion and snail's-pace driving. Fortunately, for those of us in the southern part of the state, there are some comparable, and amazing, options available if we just head in the other direction!

One such choice is the Sylvan Heights Bird Park—an easy two-hour drive south from Richmond, and just over the North Carolina border. The Sylvan Heights Bird Park is home to the largest collection of exotic and rare waterfowl in the world. It's essentially a zoo exclusively for birds; if you have bird lovers in your family, this park is the place for you!

My family visited on an unseasonably warm day in February and spent about four hours thoroughly exploring the entire park (full disclosure, we *love* birds). Most homeschooling families could probably explore the park in two to three hours. Birds are arranged both in groups (e.g., South American, North American, multi-national, and endangered species) and individually (special birds like toucans, birds of paradise, and whooping cranes). The grouped birds are in large, walk-through aviaries with netting over them, while the individual birds are in large cages or fenced-in areas. The overall park is beautiful to walk through, with lots of shade and even a lovely woodland path from which to view beaver lodges and dams.

Other fun activities include “The Landing Zone,” where you feed birdseed on a stick to budgies, small Australian parakeets. We had such a great time doing this, we actually went back and did it twice. I figured the extra dollar to purchase a feeding stick was going to a good cause—supporting the park's conservation mission. It was great fun to watch the parakeets land on our heads and feet and stick themselves in our pockets! Younger kids (third grade and up, according to the park website) might also enjoy doing the “Endangered Species Passport,” an activity where they search the park for different endangered species to mark off and earn a special stamp at the end. They can learn a lot about different species of birds along the way. There is also a scavenger hunt aimed at children (second grade and younger) that will help them identify the birds.

Learning opportunities abound at this park, whether you are a seasoned birder, doing a unit study on birds, or just love getting out and experiencing something new. With just a little preparation beforehand, you and your kids can enjoy a fantastic trip to the park. The website offers educator's guides for elementary, middle, and high school that are worth printing out and taking along. They all have to do with observation, an important scientific skill. And if you have a photographer in the family, this is a fantastic place to hone those skills, too!

One of the other great things about the park is its fully operational breeding center for rare and endangered birds. My son was disappointed that the breeding center is not open to the public because he thought this would be the most interesting part of the park. (It *is* open for tours at various times of the year for certain membership levels.) Signs throughout the park tell you about the birds they breed and

where they send them. I think this was one of the most interesting things we learned about while we were there. There is also an incubator at the welcome center that warms eggs and shelters baby chicks.

On the day of our visit, there were newly hatched baby geese and a variety of eggs from cranes, avocets, flamingos, and kookaburras. This was possibly the *cutest* part of our visit!

The park is located somewhat off the beaten path in Scotland Neck, North Carolina (near the Roanoke Rapids exit of I-95). We definitely needed our GPS to navigate our way there once we left the interstate, but it was easy to do so. The drive from Richmond went by quickly! We packed our lunches and ate at the shady picnic tables provided within the park—with a lovely view of some speckled pigeons. However, there are about 10 restaurants located within the town of Scotland Neck, a mere mile from the park.

The [Sylvan Heights website](#) is full of fantastic information. It has a great video that gives an overview of the park and tells about their mission of conservation. The website also provides all the general information you might need about visiting, including the address and cost.

Overall, this has been one of the best field trips we have taken this year, and we take a lot, so this is saying something! So much so, that, at the end of the day, we applied our admission to a membership, figuring that with just one visit a season, we would get our money's worth. We can't wait to return!

Mary Sandkam lives in Richmond with her husband and son. When they aren't on a field trip, they can often be found knee-deep in a local stream.