

THE WILLIAMSBURG FLYER

JANUARY 1982

Que pasa, amigos?! So, we made it into another year, and none too soon either, I might add. The old one was running out of days, don't you know. But how can we begrudge a year that gave us a marvelous Bing Crosby Christmas? Thinking back on that alone, I see a smile on your brow.

Hey, you want something to be glad all over about! Wait till you find out what our first program of 1982 will do for you. This annum will be devoted to getting to know the bird families. This month's program will present an overview of all of the major avian families, and in the ensuing months local experts will go in to more detail on those families most often encountered locally. The meeting will be in Millington Hall in room 117. This is where we used to meet before the asbestos fiasco of last fall sent us to temporary quarters elsewhere. Meeting time is at 7:30 p.m. on Wednesday, January 20, 1982. Please be there and by all means BRING YOUR BIRD BOOKS.

I'll tell you what else you can bring also. Money! Yep, it's that time again. Birdonomics is going scratch at what chicken feed you have left after the holiday season past. Leigh Jones is our reigning duesmistress now and she will be anxiously prowling about looking for dues-paying members to reap. Individual fees are \$5 (\$3 for students). Family memberships may be obtained for \$7.50. Dues may also be mailed to Leigh at 505-B Tyler Street, Williamsburg.

A brief pause to explain the annual levy for members seems appropriate. One may wonder why the charge if we've been hauling in dough by selling bird seed? This money will go towards our recently established graduate student scholarship. The dues monies are used primarily for postage (12 mailings zaps almost half of a regular dues right away). The club also subscribes to the Bird Watchers Digest for the Regional Library, buys books for the library (the most recent one being The Country Journal Book of Birding and Bird Attraction by Alan Pistorius), purchases bird seed for the Pines convalescent center, pays for a club mailbox and club stationary and an annual membership to the Virginia Society of Ornithology, for which we receive the Raven and the VSO newsletter. Considering that many organizations must pay up to fifty dollars a night just to have the meeting facilities we get for free, our dues go a long, long way. Besides, with monthly programs and field trips you simply can't get a better deal. Further we provide funds to maintain an extremely effective bluebird project and purple martin project throughout the community.

For our initial avian excursion for the 1982 campaign we will hie away to Newport News City Park. If you'd like to go please assemble at the Colonial Williamsburg Information Center south parking lot at 7:00 a.m. on Saturday, January 23rd. The park is right off Rt. 143 near Ft. Eustis and since it is so close folks may leave early if they wish. The lake there is packed with all types of waterfowl that are so used to people they hardly flinch when birders get close. Red-headed woodpeckers and red-shouldered hawks are usually present. The birding is easy and leisurely. Come on out and really get 1982 off to a flying start.

The greedy visage of the Income Tax Monster is beaming just around the corner. When you file your state return, please look carefully at Line 20 on the form. This most recent addition has been dubbed the Lifeline for Virginia's Wildlife. Very simply it enables you to donate a portion of your

refund to the funding of non-game species research. Next year you may deduct your contribution from your income tax. At last the Old Dominion is showing signs of moving out of the nineteenth century and putting forth a state-wide effort to facilitate environmental conservation on a species level. Please give every bit of support you can. This is a major way to let the governing bodies know we really do care.

Our relentless records chairman, Bill Sheehan, is in the midst of updating our local avifauna checklist. He's already done some comparative studies of local Christmas counts and just felt an overall list revamping was in order. The ole captain has even provided an annual breakdown of reported species since the club's inception. In 1978 two hundred and fifteen species were reported; the following year the species list dipped to 212. For 1980 we tallied 218 species and this past year we garnered a record 227 species. The species list since 1978 is 262 not including the navy man's pride and joy, starlings, English sparrows and Paul Baker birds (pigeons). With historical data included, the local list is pumped up to 289. The possibility of getting to 300 is very real. I mean who would ever have guessed we could claim a white pelican and a frigate bird? You can't never tell. Keep those bird cards and letters rolling in to Bill. It keeps him off the streets!

Now to the poop on the birds. Some of us have been getting rather pointed phone calls and/or other communications regarding the paucity of feathered friends bellying up to the feeder stations. Very often it's someone we don't even know, and all too often they are laying the blame on the bird seed. The plain and simple truth is that there simply aren't that many birds around this year. My participation on several Christmas counts brought that home very strongly. Particularly absent are the large numbers of winter finches we all griped about last year. True, there are a few, but they are local and inconsistent. Add this to the fact that the wild food crop this fall was excellent and therefore is providing a superb natural buffet for all birds, and you have the makings for a slow run at the feeders. Checking with folks as far off as Richmond revealed that the dirth is not restricted to our area. At my feeder stations on Queen's Lake I haven't been able to put out enough food. So I can relate very definitely that it has nothing to do with the bird seed. Since last December my feeders and several I've seen in Williamsburg have shown a dramatic upswing in activity. We must also keep in mind that our winter has been relatively mild thus far (knock on Brian Taber's head), and the little fellers have found their larder fully stocked and readily accessible. As supplies dwindle we should see more feeder assaults.

Many of the season's bird counts were severely hindered by inclement or bitterly cold weather. The Newport News count gleaned 110 species including two peregrines and a frigid ruby-throated hummingbird! Our own count was greeted by 12⁰ morning temperatures, strong winds and lots of ice. The Hog Island crew led by Mitchell Byrd got the count gems with three common terns (extremely unusual for winter inland), the white pelican and the four white-fronted geese. The count total came to 101, our next to the lowest tally in five years. The other species of note were the 175,000 grackles, almost half a million red-winged blackbirds, close to 5000 robins, nine bald eagles, ten great horned owls, two phoebes and one logger-head shrike (at Hog Island). Low this year were orioles (only 7), no evening grosbeaks, 2 siskins, no coots or barred owls or woodcocks, and only twenty quail. For everyone who stuck it out that day, a sincere, warm -- Thank you. The goodies Jewel Thomas and Cynthia Long got together for the counters were excellent!

Other counts ran as follows -- Cape Charles 156 species in the rain and fog, Back Bay 138 species including 2 rough-legged hawks; Little Creek 133 species highlighted by anhinga, Western grebe, parasitic jaeger, orange-crowned warbler, great cormorant, lesser black-backed gull and harlequin duck. The Mathews count managed a soggy 103 species on January 3.

One bit of drama unfolded during the Williamsburg count. Members of the Cheatham crew observed a great black-backed gull dispatching a ruddy duck by holding it by the head and neck under water. These gulls have quite a documentary for predation, and killing a small duck for food was certainly an example of their opportunistic behavior.

There is a report of a gyrfalcon in Lancaster, Pa. in case you are headed that way.

The annual mid-winter bald eagle survey got under way on Saturday, January 2. Mitchell Byrd, Tom Armour and Sherwin Beck airplaned the James River to Richmond and the Chickahominy and its tributaries on that date and turned up 61 eagles including one golden near Presque Isle. Thirty-nine of these birds were immatures which is very encouraging. Dick Hines combined bassing and birding on the Chickahominy on January 2 and tallied five bald eagles, 3 immatures and 2 adults, the latter in the same tree!

ASK OWL:

The bill of an oystercatcher is long and laterally compressed giving it the shape much like that of an oysterman's knife. The chisel-like tip of the bill enables the oystercatcher to poke into an open bivalve and snip the muscle that closes the shell.