

## THE WILLIAMSBURG FLYER

May 1986

On the nights of April 28th, 29th and 30th, the temperatures were in the low 60's and the wind was from the southeast. There was a significant movement of birds to the north during this time, setting the stage for a very successful Spring Count. Anyone who was outside in a quiet area and listening upward may have heard the short "chip" notes of warblers and thrushes passing overhead. Many birds migrate just over treetop level and call regularly enough to put on a very interesting show in the darkness.

This has become an activity that I look forward to each spring and fall and is best when frontal systems move through this area. There are birders who can identify many species from these brief notes and there are of course other bonuses, such as seeing shooting stars.

Our 9th annual Spring Count began on May 4th with temperatures in the upper 30's, but warmed to 70° by midday. The migration had brought many birds back, but a cool spring season had apparently prevented others from making it as far as Virginia.

Our 8 geographic areas were again well covered and I want to thank the participants for their time and energy afield. Bill Williams and Bill Sheehan covered Cheatham; Rich Goll and Cindy Carlson covered Middle Plantation which includes News Road and Longhill Swamp; Ruth Beck, Fred Blystone, Joy Archer and Carolyn Lowe covered College Woods, Waller Mill and the country road to Carter's Grove, among other places; Tom Armour, Grant Olson, and Bob Morris did Kingsmill; Dot Silsby, Betty Fields and Lew Wilkerson did the upper country area known as Skimino; Dave West somehow managed to cover Jolly Pond route singlehandedly; Bill Snyder and Jack Gross did the parkway to Jamestown and Jamestown Island; and I covered Hog Island along with Fenton Day and Cathy Reiniers.

I recently attended the Virginia Statewide Conference on Volunteerism where we celebrated all of those who unselfishly give time to various causes. The Spring Count and the many additional bird club activities illustrate very well the volunteer commitment of our members. It takes much help and coordination to be a successful club.

As for the results of the Count, I think that we did very well. The total species count was 162. This compares with a nine year average of 153. This was our highest total ever despite the fact that many birds including cuckoos apparently had not yet arrived. In fact, we missed cuckoos for the first time ever on a spring count. Birds that were in our area during the week preceeding the count and including the day after include dunlin, winter wren, veery, black-throated green warbler, and amazingly enough, gull-billed tern. The two gull-bills were found 5-5-86 by Tom Armour and Bill Sheehan at Hog Island. The sighting represents a new area record for these birds which are generally found along the coast.

Other interesting results from the count included Bonaparte's gull, seaside sparrows, sharp-tailed sparrows, cliff swallow, white-rumped sandpiper, Lincoln's sparrow, both night herons and a ruff. The ruff also constituted an area record and is described at the end of this newsletter. The Lincoln's sparrow is one of very few area records and a first for our Spring Count. Again, congratulations to all participants and to the club for supporting the event.

Our club has donated two more books to the Williamsburg Regional Library. They are Bird Watching with American Women by Deborah Strom and Garden Birds by Dr. Noble Proctor. Dr. Proctor's book includes bird silhouettes, and information on attracting birds to the yard and garden. I hear that both books are very interesting.

The club picnic will be held at York River State Park on May 17th from 10:00 a.m. until 3:00 p.m. The location is at Shelter #1. Those who plan to attend should contact Betty Williams who will be coordinating the various covered dishes that people will bring. There is a need for salad dishes and desserts. Each should serve about four people. The club will provide beverages and cold cuts. Please come for a delightful day of birding and good company.

Rich Goll and Cindy Carlson returned in April from a trip to Japan and Hong Kong. The trip was not primarily a birding venture, but they were able to find black kites, blue magpies, jungle crows, and many others in between temple visits.

Last month I forgot to mention that a redpoll had been seen on each of the first two Saturdays in March at a Croaker feeder. Other redpolls were reported from Virginia Beach, Highland County and Charlottesville. A dickcissel was also at the same Virginia Beach feeder, I understand.

This was a very good feeder year and of course our siskins are still here, probably due to leave in mid-May. I received many calls in response to my unofficial feeder survey and the new additions are as follows. Rich and Cindy entertained ruby-crowned kinglets feeding on suet as did Barry Ensley. Barry said they also fed on peanut butter and grits. He had a faithful brown thrasher also which ate walnuts. Ruth Beck feeds fish crows and common crows, as well as red-shouldered hawks on dog food, meat and table scraps. She even gets hermit thrushes by putting out fruit peels.

Bill Sheehan attracts hermit thrushes with sunflower hearts and has had ruby-crowns and flickers at the suet feeder. These reports added seven more birds to the feeder list bringing the total so far to 47 species of birds which took food from feeders during the winter of '85-'86. That's an amazing assortment.

On May 4, Bob Cross led a group of Peninsula birders on a pelagic trip which left from Ocean City, Maryland. The trip was arranged through the Peninsula Nature and Science Center where Bob works. Bob usually covers the Jolly Pond area for our Spring Count but this year he decided to do the Big Pond. The group found several fin whales including a calf very near to the boat. The birds included arctic tern, parasitic jaeger, black tern, northern phalarope and lots of gannets. The seas were rough and the group ventured out to about 40 miles offshore. Pelagic trips are always exciting with unexpected arrivals and birds often showing up.

In other miscellaneous news, Julie Hotchkiss found glossy ibis and palm warblers at Hog Island on April 15, and Homer Jones and Martha Armstrong reported ruby-throated hummingbirds as early as April 10th.

The Virginia Society of Ornithology will hold its 52nd annual meeting at Longwood College, Farmville, Virginia on May 23, 24 and 25. The theme of the meeting is "The VSO Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow". The hosts will be members of the Lynchburg Bird Club. There will be field trips Saturday and Sunday and a professional papers session at 2:00 p.m. Saturday.

The guest speaker at the banquet Saturday will be Director of Cape

May Bird Observatory Peter J. Dunne. The subject is "Hawkwatching in the Shadow of the Light". Please contact me if you want additional information about this great birding, educational and social event.

Remember that next spring our club will host the 53rd Annual Meeting. More details will be in upcoming newsletters. Needless to say, we will need good organizers and people of energy to plan for 1987. Bill Williams also reported at the April meeting that the meeting organizers this year want to make a time capsule with memorabilia from local chapters.

Again I thank everyone for their calls and notes which contributed to this newsletter. I enjoy reporting about member's trips, both locally and away from Virginia. In addition, the calls about environmental concerns keep us all well informed. As always, call Brian Taber at 253-1181 or write to 104 Druid Court, Williamsburg.

Bird of the Season: Ruff      *Philomachus pugnax*

The ruff is a large, plump shorebird which lives throughout much of Eurasia. Its size is generally between that of greater and lesser yellow-legs. There are several good field marks, even for the autumn bird which is much less colorful. The bill is stout and dark but tends to be paler, even yellow-orange at the base and tapers to a slightly drooped tip. The legs and feet may be orange, red, yellowish or greenish.

Females, known as reeves are smaller than males and resemble yellow-legs, but are buffier with no barring on the flanks. The spring coloration of the ruff is extremely variable. The head, neck and "collar" feathers can be puffed up into a dramatic mane due to erectile feathers. The head and collar colors may be white, reddish, black or a combination.

The Hog Island bird seen on May 4th had greenish legs, a very scaly looking back due to new, unworn dark feathers with buff feather edgings. This is a striking mark characteristic of few other shorebirds. The head and shoulders were reddish and the neck was grayish-red and somewhat "shaggy". There were black streaks along the sides of breasts and light markings around the eye.

As the bird flew it revealed a diagnostic rump pattern which shows a dark median line bordered by oval white patches. The underparts were mostly white.

The bird fed alone along the muddy edges of the ponds, rarely venturing into the water. The bird was apparently a first year male, molting later than adult birds, although the great plumage variability makes identification more difficult.

On the breeding grounds, ruffs take up fixed stations or display grounds. Females come and mate, often with several males. The birds are rare but regular fall and spring visitors to our east and west coasts and to the Great Lakes.