

The Williamsburg Flyer

JANUARY, 1987

*"In summer when I passed the place,
I had to stop and lift my face;
A bird with an angelic gift
Was singing in it sweet and swift.*

*No bird was singing in it now.
A single leaf was on a bough,
And that was all there was to see
In going twice around the tree."*

Many of us can certainly identify with Robert Frost who wrote these words in his poem, "Looking for a Sunset Bird in Winter."

Cold weather birding has its rewards, especially if you happen to be inside watching an active feeder. So far our mild season has kept most birds away from feeders though there are reports of Purple Finches showing up.

Our January program will be held at **Millington Hall**, as usual, and the date is the **21st at 7:30**. We are fortunate to have **Ruth Beck** on hand to proudly present her particular program on the "Plight of the Piping Plover." Perhaps people will participate by being present. Ruth's extensive field experience will be evident as she fills us in on a threatened species occurring in few places in Virginia.

The **January Field Trip** on the **24th** will be an outing to **Newport News Park**, the **Yorktown Waterfront** and the **Colonial Parkway** along the York. It should be a day filled with excellent views of waterfowl. Please assemble at **7:30 a.m.** at the **Colonial Williamsburg Information Center**.

The Club's 10th Annual Christmas Bird Count was held on December 21st. It was sunny, windy and temperatures were mostly in the 30's. Our group of about 20 birders managed to find 102 species of birds in our 15 mile count circle. There were rather low numbers of waterfowl and even some of the woodland birds. Red-headed Woodpecker, however, were in fairly good supply, as were Eastern Bluebirds.

Tom Armour found the only Woodcock, Bettye Fields, the only Hairy Woodpecker. Bob Cross, Dave West and Barry Ensley discovered a lingering Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, an excellent winter record. We found 11 Bald Eagles, three of which were adults. Rich Goll and Cindy Carlson

turned up Rusty Blackbirds as did Ruth Beck and Fred Blystone. Also on the list were Black-crowned Night-Heron, Least Sandpiper, Marsh Wren, Great Horned Owl, Eastern Screech-Owl, Barred Owl, Ring-necked Pheasant, Common Snipe, Eastern Phoebe and Common Yellowthroat. Congratulations to Bill Williams and everyone who participated!

The Hampton Roads Bird Club count was held on December 20th. They recorded 115 species including Harlequin Duck, Great Cormorant, Snow Bunting and Northern Waterthrush. A very impressive showing indeed.

The December 6th trip to Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge was a brisk affair. Nine club members explored the natural beauty of this seaside and marsh environment. The temperature was only about 25° at 7:30 but the sun soon warmed the temperature to about 50°. Some of the birds on hand included Brant, Gannets, Surf Scoters, Common and Red-throated loons, Sanderlings, Marsh Wren, Sedge Wren, a King Rail seen well by several members, Snow Geese, Tundra Swans, Northern Harrier, Savannah Sparrows, Tree Swallows, and Boat tailed Grackles.

On the way to the Bridge-Tunnel, following a very nice picnic lunch on the grass near the Back Bay visitor center, we encountered a tremendous blackbird flock. The birds were feeding in a large open, bare field and numbered in the tens of thousands. There were Red-winged Blackbirds, Common Grackles and Starlings. Tom Armour somehow managed to focus in on a lone adult male Yellow-headed Blackbird amidst the milling horde.

The Bridge-Tunnel highlight was a group of four Harlequin Ducks, one being a brilliantly marked male. We also saw five Great Cormorants together, some Oldsquaws, White-winged Scoters and Bonaparte's Gulls. It was a very full day.

As early as December 12th, Tom Armour and Grant Olson had turned up a male Eurasian Widgeon at Sunken Meadow Pond in Surry County. On December 3rd, Fenton Day found a male Harlequin Duck at Grandview Beach in Hampton, along with Oldsquaws. He also spotted Lapland Longspurs and a light-phase Rough-legged Hawk at Craney Island in Portsmouth. Short-eared Owls are also being seen there, along with a second Rough-leg.

Starting with the January newsletter, Fred Blystone will be sending out membership renewal forms to those who have not paid 1987 dues. As you pay, please remember to tell a friend who might also enjoy supporting our club and its many worthwhile projects.

The newsletter has recently been sporting a new format thanks to a computer typing service here in Williamsburg, but a big round of applause should certainly go to Jean Armour who has faithfully and quickly typed up many a newsletter over the years.

There has been a Snowy Owl in Crystal City near Washington, D.C. and another much closer to Williamsburg, in Hopewell. This bird has been around from at least Christmas Eve to December 30th. I visited the spot on December 28th, but along with many other birders, failed to find the bird which everyone said was so cooperative. It had been regularly observed in, on, and around various buildings near a vacant outlet mall surrounded by a vast, unpaved parking lot on one side and a railroad track on the other. The many roofs had a variety of vents, chimneys, pipes, ladders, rails and fixtures which made for excellent birding spots, even for such a large bird. After several hours I had memorized all of the various configurations, but had to leave before late afternoon. I did meet many birders from other areas of the state, some of whom also ventured to Surry to see the Eurasian Widgeon.

Please let me know of the interesting winter birds that are being seen so that I may spread the word. As always, report rareties to Bill Sheehan for dispersal on the club's rare bird alert.

BIRD OF THE SEASON: SNOWY OWL *Nyctea Scandiaca*

The Snowy Owl occurs throughout much of Canada and Alaska in our hemisphere, erupting southward into the northern and central states in certain years. It is a large bird, somewhat bigger than the Great Horned Owl. The basic white plumage is more heavily barred with gray or black in the female and immature birds. The eyes are yellow, there are no ear tufts.

Snowy Owls hunt in the daytime along coastlines, dunes, tundra and open country. They perch on hay- stacks, barns, silos, and vacant mall buildings, seldom in trees. Lemmings provide a staple food as do hares and ptarmigans. It is thought that the lemming "down cycles" are responsible for Snowy invasions southward.

Pure white adult birds generally remain in the Arctic near the breeding grounds. The nest is on the ground and thinly lined with moss and feathers. The 5 to 8 eggs are incubated as soon as laid. The young bird from the first egg may be ready to fly by the time the final egg hatches.

Happy New Year!

To submit information for the newsletter,
contact Brian Taber at 253-1181
or write to
104 Druid Court, Williamsburg, Virginia.