

# *The Williamsburg Flyer*

March, 1987

The snowy and rainy trend continued in our area throughout February, and the natural food crop was further depleted causing the finches to finally come in to feeders. Though club members had scattered reports in December and January, it was not until February that the birds became regular.

There is a lot of bird news but first let me remind everyone that the **March program** will be held on the **18th at 7:30 at Millington Hall**. Our topic is **Ospreys** and our speaker is **Dr. Mitchell Byrd** of William and Mary. Dr. Byrd is well known for his efforts with endangered and threatened wildlife and will present a very informative program.

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The **March field trip** on the **21st at 7:30 a.m.** will be to the **south side of the James** - again. Please meet as usual at the **Information Center**. There were not enough people to form a trip there last month as planned, so we will try again.

The **April program** will feature **Lynn Walters**, a William and Mary graduate student who will speak on **chickadees**. Lynn has previously entertained us with a talk on puffins.

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Bill Sheehan received many calls about Fox Sparrows, especially during the snows in early and mid-February. I have had a Fox Sparrow daily for nearly three weeks. Bill was one of the first to have Evening Grosbeaks on February 7th and many people, including Cindy Carlson and Rich Goll, had grosbeaks by the end of the month. Rich and Cindy will be leaving their feeder behind, however, as they head for the tropical islands of Trinidad and Tobago off of the northeast coast of Venezuela. I look forward to their reports of exotic sightings.

Julie Hotchkiss had one particularly fantastic day at her feeder when, in addition to her many American Goldfinches, she had an immature Red Crossbill and a Redpoll on February 11th! Unfortunately, the birds did not make a return appearance. Julie also reports Common Mergansers on the James River near her home.

There are some very large mixed flocks of blackbirds in the area. The flocks contain Red-winged Blackbirds, Common Grackles, Brown-headed Cowbirds, Rusty Blackbirds and Starlings. They have been seen in large fields, wet areas and at feeders. Also, 100 to 200 Snow Geese have been seen along with the Canada Geese at Hog Island in Surry.

I received a call from Mead Porter from Gloucester who reports that five Mute Swans were in the area where Perrin Creek meets the York River. One bird had been shot and was being taken to a veterinarian. Mute Swans are only rarely seen south of Maryland and Chincoteague. Bill Williams was hoping to see a Winter Wren this year, but he did not expect to see one in his living room. Tipped off by an excited cat, Bill found the bird and chased it through several rooms before it disappeared. It presumably left by the same route through which it entered. Bill really needs to clear those tree stumps and dead logs out of his living room.

I do not have finch numbers for feeders other than mine, but as an example of the increased feeder activity, on one recent day I had 30 American Goldfinches, 15 Pine Siskins, 5 House Finches, 20 Purple Finches, and 4 Evening Grosbeaks all within an hour. Bill Shehan has a Ruby-Crowned Kinglet regularly at his suet feeder and as many as 3 Downy Woodpeckers. Bill and Thom Blair turned up the first Osprey of the year at Yorktown on the very early date of February 14. They watched as the bird caught a large fish and took it to the understructure of the bridge to devour it.

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Fenton Day participated in a pelagic trip which left Ocean City, Maryland on February 14th. The boat traveled to Virginia waters as well, some forty miles off of Chincoteague. The best birds were several Dovekies, Black-legged Kittiwakes and at least 6 Atlantic Puffins. An unexpected surprise was a Redpoll in a flowerpot at the end of the pier where the boat was docked. The weather for the trip, which had been cancelled the previous week, was good with only moderate waves and temperatures in the 40's.

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The Club is providing bird information to the developers at Ford's Colony subdivision so that the expansion there can be done knowing what a rich and scenic area it is. We have used part of the area, including an old irrigation pond which is now occupied by beavers, on our Christmas and spring counts for many years.

Ruth Beck sent me a copy of the mid-winter Bald Eagle count summarized in the "Outdoor Report" newsletter of the Virginia Commission of Game and Inland Fisheries. It is as follows:

Virginia's wintering population of bald eagles is down by 23 birds from last year's count. Dr. Mitchell Byrd of the College of William and Mary says the decrease is not thought to reflect a population decline. Byrd says it is more likely related to the moderate weather before the count which resulted in more birds staying further north than usual.

A total of 220 eagles were sighted this year, 125 were adults and 95 immature birds were seen. The ratio is about the same as observed in 1986. The number of eagles counted on the Potomac River actually increased while counts in most other areas were down. The chart showing the surveys for 1987 and 1986 is listed below.

Area	Adults		Immatures	
	1986	1987	1986	1987
York, Pamunkey, Mattaponi	8	14	1	1
Rappahannock, Piankatank	58	42	54	31
James River	36	24	34	20
Inland Impoundments	8	2	9	1
Eastern Shore-Lower Tidewater	<u>5</u> 152	<u>4</u> 125	<u>3</u> 135	<u>1</u> 95

Dr. Byrd coordinates the mid-winter count every year as part of the Commission's Nongame and Endangered Species Program. Funds for this work come totally from private donations and tax donations made through the state's tax check off program. Residents may choose to donate all or part of their state income tax refund to the program by checking line 10-A or 20-A on state income tax forms.

More information on the Nongame and Endangered Species program can be obtained by contacting Suzie Gilley, Education Division, 4010 W. Broad St., Richmond, Va. 23230-1104.

**Bird of the Season: Rusty Blackbird**  
*euphagus carolinus*

March is an excellent time to look for Rusty Blackbirds around Williamsburg. They join the flocks of other blackbirds and visit feeders, but they also form large flocks by themselves in wet forest areas. Rustys can be seen along News Road, the Colonial Parkway, Lake Matoaka, Longhill Swamp and a number of other areas.

Rusty Blackbirds resemble Common Grackles though they are smaller and shorter-tailed. Like grackles, they have a light eye, which is usually pale yellow. Male Rustys may be slightly iridescent. The female is usually grayish. Young birds may have dark eyes for several months. Fall birds and immatures show rusty red feather edges which wear off by late winter. They are also barred below and may show rusty crowns and buffy eyebrows.

Rustys are noisy and are often heard long before they are seen. Like other blackbirds, their sounds sometimes defy description, but they generally consist of squeaks, whistles, and clucks. One famous description of the sound is that it is like a squeaky or rusty hinge on a gate. Rustys may be seen walking in shallow water as they search for insects, fruits and grains. They can be approached quite closely when the main flock is preoccupied with feeding.

The more western Brewer's Blackbird resembles the Rusty, but is more glossy and has a thicker bill. The female Brewer's differ in having a dark eye. Rusty Blackbirds breed throughout Canada and winter in much of the east and central United States.

Red-breasted Nuthatches, unlike last winter, have been scarce. One was calling in my yard on March 1st, but did not come in to the feeder. As Spring draws near, the Purple Martin Committee headed by Bob Morris and the Bluebird Committee headed by Joe Doyle will become more active. If anyone is interested in lending support to these very important groups, please let the leaders know or contact me.

Fred Blystone reminds us that people who receive membership renewal forms with their newsletter have not yet paid 1987 dues. Also, please welcome new members John and Julie Murphy and Andrea Hildreth.



Carolyn Lowe sent me a reprint from the Conservation Council of Virginia's December report. It contains some valuable information for those of us who feed birds. It was submitted by the Prince George Audubon Society. It is as follows:

#### BACKYARD BIRD FEEDING TIPS

With the advent of cooler temperatures, many of us will be stocking our backyard feeders with our favorite variety of birdseed, and maybe putting up suet bags for woodpeckers and their friends. A few words of warning will help assure that you are doing your best to keep "your" birds healthy and well fed over the winter months.

The staff at Hawk Mountain Sanctuary cautions that the piling up of thistle seed husks and unopened seeds under a thistle feeder can create a serious problem for some birds. It seems that thistle seed is so small that when it piles up, air cannot get through it. When this accumulation of seeds and shells combines with droppings from the birds "munching" overhead, it can become a breeding ground for bacteria. Birds that feed from this pile can ingest this typhoid-type bacteria, and in some cases it can be fatal to them. All you need to do to avoid this hazard is to rake up and dispose of the debris periodically, leaving the ground relatively clear and open to the elements. Sunflower seeds rarely cause such problems, because the shells are big enough to allow air to penetrate and the bacteria cannot thrive.

Almost any kind of seed can become a breeding ground for bacteria if it is contaminated with mold - simply by letting it sit on a damp garage floor or in a humid basement, and of course it will get wet right in the feeder in bad weather. You can prevent serious problems, however, by cleaning feeders regularly, making sure there are adequate drainage holes, and storing seed in a dry place in watertight containers. And as for suet, use only in cold weather when it cannot become rancid. Let's keep our birds healthy and happy!

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There have been two meetings of the planning committee for the annual Virginia Society of Ornithology Annual Conference and we have our major committees in place. We still need more man and woman power to help with the many facets of the event, including help with baking and making floral arrangements. More details will be forthcoming.

The tentative date for our **10th Annual Spring Count** is **Sunday, May 3rd**.

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Other birds in the region in February included a Snowy Owl at Bombay Hook, Delaware and Common Redpolls at a feeder in Laurel, Maryland. There is a bird in Charleston, South Carolina that may constitute a first North American record. It is a Grey-headed Gull, a bird usually found only in South America and Africa. It has a grey hood and a distinctively patterned wing. Since Charleston is a port city, it is possible that the bird was a passenger aboard an ocean vessel. I will give more details as they become available.

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The annual Virginia Society of Ornithology field trip to Hatteras was held on February 21st. I do not know yet all of the highlights, but many ducks, gulls, herons and White Ibis were seen.

#### **DATES TO REMEMBER**

##### **March 18**

March Program - 7:30 PM - Millington Hall  
Dr. Mitchell Byrd on "Ospreys".

##### **March 21**

March Field Trip - 7:30 AM - Meet at  
Information Center.

#### **COMING ATTRACTIONS**

April Program -

Lynn Walters on chickadees.

May 3 -

10th Annual Spring Count

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