

WILLIAMSBURG FLYER

August 1987

JULY 1987 had more 90° days than any other—an astounding 23! Yet the birders and the birds were out as the early stages of migration began.

Calls to the Voice of the Naturalist in Washington, D.C., revealed that water levels were dramatically down from early summer at such birding hotspots as Chincoteague and Bombay Hook, Delaware. There was also a report of a White-winged Tern spanning at least several days at Little Creek in Delaware. Thousands of shorebirds are moving through the Middle Atlantic area now. A Ruff has been seen at Bombay Hook, as has a Rufous-necked Stint. At Chincoteague, the only decent shorebird habitat is in the area known as Swan Cove, where Hudsonian Godwits and Whimbrels have been seen, along with the more usual contingent of sandpipers and herons. White Ibis have also been seen in Maryland.

The Brown Pelicans in Virginia this summer were apparently unable to rear young at Fisherman Island, but were successful at Metomkin, a barrier island—more details later.

TRAVELING FRIENDS

Joy Archer recently traveled to Colorado and escaped our oppressive summer heat. She saw MacGillivray's warbler, which looks similar to the Mourning Warbler that we see rarely in migration or nesting in the far western Virginia mountains. She also saw Red-naped Sapsucker, Western Tanager and Broad-tailed Hummingbird among other interesting western species.

Tom Armour spent time in Florida and observed two specialty birds there. He was able to find two rather shy species—the Mangrove Cuckoo and Black-whiskered Vireo.

I have just returned from a week at Cape Hatteras, one of the finest birding areas anywhere. A number of interesting birds were seen there over the past couple of months, including many sightings of Roseate and Sooty Terns. One day in late May at Cape Point, south of the famous Lighthouse, one party observed all three jaegers, four species of shearwater and a South Polar Skua! A White-tailed Tropicbird was seen at the same location on June 30.

On July 28 I witnessed a flock of over one hundred terns—mostly Common, Sandwich and Royal—feeding over a school of Spanish Mackerel that were in turn feeding on smaller fish. It was an amazing commotion that was even joined by a lone Audubon's Shearwater. A Wood Stork was seen at Pea Island, but I was unable to find it on August 2.

NEWS ON ATLASSING . . .

I received a wonderful and much welcomed letter in July from Sue Ridd, who is the Editor of *Virginia's Breeding Bird Atlas*. The labor intensive and also quite fun effort of atlassing Virginia's breeding birds is a project of the Virginia Society of Ornithology in cooperation with the Virginia Commission of Game and Inland Fisheries and the Audubon Naturalist Society. Sue has the necessary patience, enthusiasm and energy to make such a project successful.

She was making the point in her letter that summer birding can be very rewarding as one attempts to confirm which birds are breeding where. It can bring a new and special emphasis to some of the common birds that may be taken for granted. Atlassing can also help sharpen skills of observation and raise awareness about bird behavior.

I enjoyed her description of bird observations and have included a few here because they share the joy of birding:

"Yesterday near Saltville, I saw an immature Yellow-throated Vireo. The young bird had TBL (that bewildered look) and enough down to make him (or her) look like he had on his raincoat and galoshes and rainhat. He was perched quietly as his parents were loudly attempting to distract us.

Last Saturday, three of us climbed Mt. Rogers and saw several Turkey Vultures above the canopy. Suddenly, we heard this "whoosh"—like a miniature Boeing 707 in a dive (if you know what I mean) and guess who? One of the young Peregrines flew into sight. There is a hacking station on a nearby ridge.

A week ago Sunday I was atlassing Jerry's Run which is near the West Virginia border. An unusual noise attracted my attention and there on a full run was a female Grouse. She would stand very tall and look directly at me and then she would lower her body, such that it appeared parallel with the ground and run full speed!

Closer to Williamsburg, John Bazuin and I went out to the island south of Newport Comfort. We found a nesting colony of Least Terns and two Ospreys nesting—one in a platform and the other on the ground. The platform nest had two fully feathered young almost ready to fledge while the female on the ground nest had one young and one egg. Three Brown Pelicans, a Tricolored Heron, two Oystercatchers, Black-backed Gulls, Willets, and Red-winged Blackbirds were also observed. We found a Red-winged Blackbird nest with three young that had hatched recently. So the birds are around and busy. Now is the time to find a spot and sit quietly waiting for the immature birds to hop into view."

Thanks, Sue!



Bird of the Season

Caspian Tern:

Sterna caspia

It is in late summer that we are likely to see Caspian Terns in our area as they head southward toward wintering grounds, which in our hemisphere extend from about South Carolina to Venezuela. The birds also pass through in the spring on their northern journey. Caspians can be found nesting at inland lakes through the Midwest, Central Canada and the western United States. The species also breeds on the Gulf Coast. We are fortunate to have several pairs nesting each year on Virginia's barrier islands. The widely wandering Caspian also occurs in Europe, Asia, Africa and Australia.

The York River and the James River are excellent places to watch for Caspians, with Hog Island in Surry County providing perhaps the best spot for concentrations of dozens of these birds. Often, though, they are seen singly in the company of gulls and other species of terns, following the constantly moving fish supply.

Caspians are the largest of terns, resembling the slightly smaller Royal Tern. The heavy Caspian bill is red, however, and often dusky at the tip. The under-surface of the tips of the broader wings is darker than the Royals and the tail is less forked, giving it a more gull-like appearance. The black cap remains intact for most of the summer, unlike that of the Royal Tern in which much of the black is lost soon after spring courtship. The loud croaking call recalls that of the herons, a primitive, though distinctive sound.

Caspians are listed on our annotated checklist as uncommon transients and rare summer visitors. Average dates of occurrence are from March 27 to December 15, making sightings possible for more than 9 months of the year. The birds are sometimes seen flying over Williamsburg, presumably traveling from one river to the other.

Shirley Raynes will be sending out information about the fall bird seed sale. Please help recruit others who may want to purchase our seed. The Bird Club is able to do very worthwhile things with the profits, and we look forward to a most successful sale. The actual seed pickup date has not been set yet and will be coordinated by others on our seed sale Committee. We will again need support from members to unload seed from the truck and into buyers' cars. Please come and be part of a great event!

The **August field trip** will be held on the **22nd** and will be an excursion to Craney Island in Portsmouth. The area is one of the best to find Wilson's Phalaropes! On hand should be hundreds of shorebirds in this unique environment. Please assemble at **7:30 at the Information Center Parking lot** as usual.

Jack and Annette Gross sent me a card describing a recent experience as follows:

"On Sunday, July 26, Jack and I went to Chickahominy Shores in Providence Forge to visit a friend. In her backyard was a huge mimosa tree, its branches having about a 50-foot span. It was full of those lovely pink fluffs. We saw about 50 hummingbirds feeding on this tree. It looked alive, there was so much movement! Our friend said that on a perfect day when all the weather conditions are just right, that at about 7:00 p.m. she has seen 'hundreds' of hummers on the tree at one time! When we went Sunday, there had been a windy period just prior to our visit, so we saw about 50. In the tree we also saw a female northern Oriole and a Cedar Waxwing. We now call our friend's mimosa her 'hummingbird tree'. You should hear the chatter!"

To submit information for the newsletter, contact Brian Taber at 253-1181 or write to 104 Drud Court, Williamsburg, VA 23185.
