



THE FLYER

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May 1992

Williamsburg Bird Club

Brian Taber, Editor (253-1181)

May Events

Meeting

Wednesday, May 20th, at 7:30 p.m. in Room 117, Millington Hall, on the William & Mary campus.

Program

Sarah Mabey will pinpoint results of the Migratory Songbird Research project in Virginia, part of a four state study. She comes to us from the Division of Natural Heritage at the state Department of Conservation and Recreation. Several club members participated in this study.

Field Trip

Due to the Spring Count earlier this month, there will not be a bird walk in May.

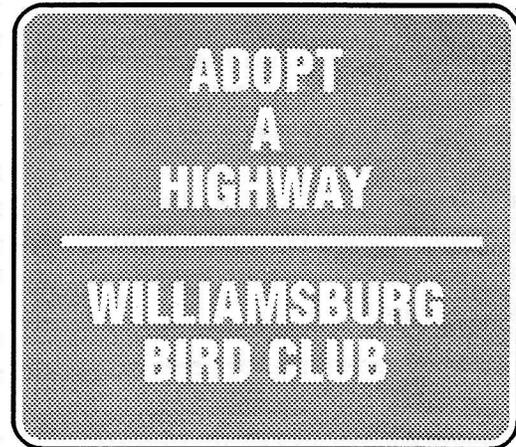
New Members

We would like to take this opportunity to welcome the newest members of the Williamsburg Bird Club.

Hilda Law (220-3867)
6 Ensigne Spence
Williamsburg, Va. 23185

Edith Edwards (253-0266)
114 Stanley Drive
Williamsburg, Va. 23188

An apology is owed Dr. & Mrs. John Cannon whose last name was listed as Connor when welcoming them in last month's FLYER.



Ten members turned out to help Bill Davies with this quarter's Route 5 cleanup. They worked a total of 19.5 person hours and collected 16.5 bags of trash. There were a total of 65 pounds of glass, 6 pounds of aluminum and 1 bag of plastic containers recycled. The ten members were Fred Blystone, Louise Menges, Pat & Mike Healy, Phyllis Johnson, Dick Mahone, Bill Williams, Bob & Martha Burgess and Tom Armour. Bill appreciates the efforts of all, but would like to extend a special congratulations to Bob & Martha as "First-timers"!

You might be interested in knowing that forty-five states now have Adopt-a-Highway programs and that Virginia boasts the second largest program in the nation! Only North Carolina has more, approximately 7,000.

To date in Virginia, 5,300 groups and individuals have adopted more than 12,400 miles of road—that's nearly one-fourth of all state-maintained highways!

April Field Trip

On the 18th, Steve Rottenborn led members Emily Sharrett, Marilyn Zeigler, Bettye Fields, Amanda Allen, Tom Armour and Jean and Charles Rend to Waller Mill Park, discovering Wild Turkeys, Wood Thrushes, Yellow-throated Vireos, Black and White Warblers, Prairie Warblers, Hooded Warblers, Palm Warblers, Ovenbirds and 6 species of woodpeckers.

From the May/June issue of *Bird Watcher's Digest*

Bands of Goldfinches

Feeder watchers: Check out the legs on that goldfinch! As part of an ongoing, four-year-old project, American Goldfinches and Pine Siskins are being color-banded, and information about the distribution and migration of these birds is being sought. The birds were banded with solid and bicolored bands. The colors used are red, orange, light green, light and dark blue, white, and yellow. Anyone seeing one of these birds should report the color and placement of bands on each leg, as well as the date and location to Gordon E. Howard, Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management, 263 Lehotsky Hall, Clemson University, Clemson, S.C. 29364-1005. Recent returns have come from Kansas, Missouri, and Minnesota.

These two articles are from *Statelog*, published by North Carolina State University

Zoologists at North Carolina State University have found that Red-cockaded Woodpeckers stash calcium-rich bone fragments in the bark of trees—the first known instance of a bird hoarding a substance for its mineral rather than its caloric content.

The NCSU scientists, who tracked the endangered birds year-round, observed that during the egg-laying season female birds would spy a bone fragment on the ground, consume flakes of it, and then wedge the rest of it into a nearby tree.

The females returned on several occasions to retrieve the hidden fragments, thus getting the additional calcium they needed to produce strong egg shells.

Dr. Phillip Doerr, professor of zoology and forestry, says many birds store food against leaner times when it may be hard to get. But bone fragments are not rare or hard to find. Woodpeckers can find bits of bone on the forest floor in balls that birds of prey regurgitate, containing the indigestible parts of animals they have seized.

Doerr thinks the woodpeckers hoard bone fragments in order to avoid predators.

"The less time they have to spend on the ground in the open, where they are vulnerable to being seen by predators and caught," he said, "the better off they are."

Preliminary studies carried out on quail suggest that atherosclerosis (hardening of the arteries) may be triggered by a virus. Dr. Jason Shih, NCSU professor of poultry science, and his colleagues found that only quail that were infected by a herpes-related virus tended to develop atherosclerosis when fed foods rich in cholesterol. Uninfected birds resisted the disease despite a high cholesterol intake.

The studies by Shih's team suggest that when cholesterol is fed to quail carrying the latent virus, the virus becomes activated and signals a transforming gene to take over the genetic machinery of arterial smooth muscle cells. As a result, these cells proliferate and form tumor-like plaques that eventually clog the arteries, causing heart attacks or stroke.

If a viral trigger for atherosclerosis is proved, Shih said, "The upshot is that there may be more effective ways to control atherosclerosis than just lowering cholesterol."

April brought the out-of-town birds and here are some highlights: Ruby-throated Hummingbirds were around from about the 10th; the Hotchkises found a Prothonotary Warbler at their place on the 18th as well as 11 Common Loons there on the 19th; Bill Sheehan studied House Wrens, Scarlet Tannagers, Crested Flycatchers and a Solitary Vireo at his yard on the 17th; Bill and Tom Armour found a Little Blue Heron, Dunlin and dowitchers at Hog Island on the 15th; they also found Eastern Phoebes, Louisiana Waterthrushes and Northern Parulas at Hickory Signpost Road on the 22nd and at Jamestown Island on the 24th, they studied Blue-winged Warblers, Red-eyed Vireos, Solitary Sandpiper and 25 Common Yellowthroats to name only a sample; Tom and Bill were also on the road again, this time to Chippokes and Hog Island on the 25th where they saw Orchard Orioles, Yellow Warblers, Pectoral Sandpipers, a Bank Swallow, Blue Grosbeaks and White-eyed Vireos; Bill Williams found a Cerulean Warbler near Jolly Pond, one of few records for our area; Tom Armour reports a Northern Oriole at Kingsmill on the 27th near an old nest site; Tom has been seeing a Lesser Black-backed Gull at Kingsmill Marina regularly in April, most unusual; Cattle Egrets have been seen in the nearby fields and Tom also reports a dead Barred Owl on Route 199; I saw a Barred sitting very close to 199 on the 30th and hope he doesn't make the same mistake; Phyllis Jennings was amazed by the impressive presence and antics of a Great Horned Owl in her Kingsmill yard; I was lucky to find another adult Golden Eagle flying over my hawk watch station on the 12th, almost exactly a year from the last sighting; Blue-winged and Blackburnian Warblers have been singing in my yard on the 29th and 30th respectively and finally, Bill Akers and Jerry Via, on their way to the VSO annual meeting at about 2PM on the 24th, watched an adult Northern Goshawk fly across the road above their car, near the Lightfoot exit on I-64. Double Wow!!

Travelling Birders

Ty and Julie Hotchkiss spent some time in Baja California, Mexico, in March and found some endemics, such as Xantu's Hummingbird, Bedling's Yellowthroat and Gray Thrasher, among the many exotic creatures of that fascinating region. They also toured the San Blas, Mexico, area, finding Boat-billed Herons and Common Potoos, to name but a few.

Pat and Mike Healy went to Bermuda in March where they heard the migration would be "immense and spectacular". It wasn't, they say, but they did find White-tailed Tropicbirds, or "long-tails". They found Kiskadees, too, which, they report, were imported to eliminate lizards that were eating imported beetles that were supposed to control scale that was affecting the cedar trees. They also saw more Starlings and House Sparrows than they cared to. On well, such is birding!

I was able to steal a few moments of birding in Florida in April in between Disney World visits and interstate driving. The weather was perfect, though, and migration was in full swing there. I found several Swallow-tailed Kites, lots of Gray Kingbirds and White-crowned Pigeons, Cape May Warblers and a Black-whiskered Vireo, in addition to the usual armadillos, alligators and endangered manatees.

Bird of the Season

Eastern Screech Owl *Otus asio*

The Eastern Screech Owl is unique in a number of ways. First of all, it is the only small eastern owl with ear-like feather tufts. These are not true ears but only feather tufts resembling ears. Secondly, and most unusual is the fact that screech owls come in two distinct color phases. Some are reddish or rufous while others are gray. Scientists have no satisfactory explanation of this curious idiosyncrasy called "dichromatism". Especially baffling is the fact that offspring of rufous and gray mates may be one color or mixed, or the parents may be of one single color and have young of mixed colors!

The screech owl doesn't screech. Its call has been described as "a quavering, shivering moan," or "a mournful whinny or wail, tremulous, descending in pitch." Screech owls are especially vocal during mating. Its courtship display consists of much wing flapping, bowing, wailing and eye-winking. Apparently they mate for life or at least for many years.

Once mated the female chooses a nest in an old deserted woodpecker hole or natural cavity about 15 to 20 feet up. Occasionally they may nest in an old outbuilding or in man-made tree boxes. Four or five round white eggs are laid in the early spring on a bed of sticks, grass leaves and feathers. The female does most of the incubating while the male brings food to her. It is said that the hen is so intent and devoted to her duties that she would have to be lifted off of her eggs rather than leave them. Hatching

takes place in a couple of weeks. The young are very voracious and grow rapidly. Young birds may lack the ear tufts at first but by the time they reach the average size of seven to 10 inches they look like their parents.

Screech owls are very adaptable to feeding on whatever is available. They feed more on insects than any other owls, eating grasshoppers, locusts, beetles and moths. They are also excellent mousers, and catch mice, voles, chipmunks and flying squirrels. They'll take a few birds, mostly starlings and sparrows, usually during breeding and in winter. Other foods include crawfish, toads, frogs, lizards and they have even been known to catch fish at open holes in winter in the north.

Screech owls swallow their food whole or in big chunks. Bones and fur or feathers are regurgitated in the form of fuzzy looking balls or pellets.

Screech owls inhabit woodlands, farms, river bottoms, park-like groves, residential areas and parks. They are nocturnal creatures and usually nonmigratory. Often they'll use their nest throughout the winter. During the day screech owls will roost in a tree, close to the trunk. Even then it is found by roving bands of blue jays or chickadees, titmice and wrens which proceed to harass the little owl unmercifully. To avoid detection, the owl will stretch itself straight up, close its eyes so there are only slits showing and stand stump-still.

The main enemy of the screech owl is the Great-horned Owl, with hawks being their next worse enemy. Opossums will climb up to their nests and kill the owlets if they find them.

From the Bluebird, newsletter of the Lynchburg Club

Migratory Birds of the Forest

More than half of the 800 birds which breed in North America and two-thirds of the birds found in our eastern forests annually migrate to the Caribbean or to Central or South America. These migratory birds fly hundreds of miles burning fat reserves with enormous efficiency. A car burning fuel with the efficiency of a Blackpoll Warbler would get 720,000 miles per gallon. They fly at night to avoid hawks, navigating with stars and their innate sense of the magnetic north. When the sun comes up landmarks are used to make any needed course corrections.

These migratory songbirds include the thrushes, vireos, warblers, orioles, flycatchers, and tanagers. Some Roger Tory Peterson calls the "butterflies of the bird world" and others are virtuoso singers with melodic flutelike voices.

Thrushes eat worms and insects. Vireos pick crawling insects from the foliage of forest and shade trees. The tanager is a premier caterpillar hunter destroying both hairless larvae and hairy ones such as that of the gypsy moth and tent caterpillar. He also eats caterpillar parents, the nocturnal moths. Warblers industriously search their favorite trees for insects, as do other insect eating migratory birds. Without these insectivorous birds, forests would soon be stripped by defoliating spruce budworms and caterpillars.

David Stewart, a U. S. government geologist, reported that where he used to see flocks of tanagers, vireos and warblers, last year he saw not a single tanager and only one Cape May Warbler. The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service's breeding bird survey shows that 70% of migrant species have declined since 1987 in the eastern United States. Birds are losing out to habitat fragmentation, to cowbirds depositing eggs in their nest—especially the nests of warblers—and to loss of needed coastal rest areas. If migratory birds are to make this arduous trip, they must have areas where they can rest, rebuild fat reserves, and wait for good weather before flying over large bodies of water. As Jennifer Ackerman states in the March/April *Nature Conservancy*, "the annual river of birds has dwindled to a trickle". Protecting all of these stopover spaces is not possible, but the Nature Conservancy along with state and federal agencies are looking for solutions that are feasible and most beneficial to migrating birds.

Information from the March/April 1992 *Nature Conservancy*

Hummingbird Booklet

Bird Watcher's Digest sent the club, through me, a complimentary copy of "Enjoying Hummingbirds More". It contains information about feeding, planting for hummers and finding them. If anyone wants to borrow it, please let me know. If anyone wants to purchase one, they are available for \$2.50 plus \$1.00 postage and handling. I have the address. If enough people want to order them, we can get a special club rate of \$1.50 for a unit of 10 booklets, plus \$3.00 postage and handling for the first unit and only \$1.00 postage for additional units. Got all that? Let me know if you're interested.

The newsletter editor will certainly appreciate all manner of calls and submissions of information for the newsletter. Please call Brian weeknights between 6 pm and 10 pm at **253-1181** or send articles, local bird sightings, information about birds seen on vacations and such to **104 Druid Court, Williamsburg, Va. 23185**. This will insure that our newsletter is a reflection of the membership. If you're not sure about what to send, please call. Thank you!