



THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

Volume 20, Number 2

February 1996

Next Meeting

The next bird club meeting will be in room 117, Millington Hall, College of William & Mary, on February 21, 1996, at 7:30 PM. Brian Patteson, one of Virginia's leading birders and one of the country's experts on sea birds will share some of his recent off-shore experience with us in an illustrated talk labeled "Pelagic Birds." Much of Brian's off-shore work is done along the Virginia-North Carolina coast. In addition to exotic birds, he has opportunity to add photographs of whales, seals and dolphins.

A Poem

Our senior member, Lew Hopps, offers this short, happy poem to brighten these dreary winter days.

Can a little flower
Follow one about?
Can a little bird's song
Turn one inside out?
No — not really.
But the song and the fragrance can do it
And do it with a loving touch
That leaves no room
For doubt.

February Field Trip

Bill Williams will lead the February field trip down the Colonial Parkway in the direction of

Yorktown. This area, lying along the shore to the York River, is one of the premier bird lookouts near Williamsburg. At this writing Bill is trying to get permission to take the group into Cheatham Annex.

As usual the group meets at 7:15 AM on the first Saturday after a meeting, February 24, in the parking lot at the CW Visitor Center (right side of the building as you drive in the entrance), and departs at 7:30 sharp. On your way to the Visitor Center that early in the morning, don't forget the tunnel is closed this month.

President's Corner

As I sit to write this article for the February newsletter, we are in the midst of another winter storm. According to forecasters we could get another 4 to 8 inches of snow. The thing I've grown to enjoy so much on these days is having the time to watch my feeders and the frenzy of birds as they try to get their share of food. This is a time to watch the feeders carefully because unusual birds may be asking for a handout. Also, remember to keep the feeders full and water available for your visitors.

If you are able to get out in a car make a point to travel the Colonial Parkway. There you will find many birds feeding along the side of the road. In past years the variety has been very good and the surprises plenty.

Everyone have a good month of birding — enjoy those ducks while they are still here. I look forward to seeing you at the meeting February 21.

Happy birding — Lee Schuster

Renewal Reminder

Did you forget to renew your membership? Dues are \$10.00 for individuals, \$15.00 for families, \$25.00 for Patron Membership, and \$3.00 for students. Send your check for renewal to:

Treasurer, Williamsburg Bird Club

P.O. Box 1085

Williamsburg, VA 23187-1085

New Members

Welcome to the following new members:

Eleanor Walker
3011 Tanglewood Cove
Williamsburg, VA 23185

Mary & Ric Richter
465 Hunter's Ridge
Williamsburg, VA 23188

Patricia Sgrinia
7100 Church Lane
Toano, VA 23168

Richard & Ann Storey
27 The Palisades
Williamsburg, VA 23185

Rosemarie & John Eberhardt
4741 Capt. John Smith
Williamsburg, VA 23185

Hugh Beard
118 Smokehouse Lane
Williamsburg, VA 23185

Wild Birds Unlimited

Our friends at Wild Birds Unlimited donated \$143.55 to the Williamsburg Bird Club, based on their sales to our members in the fourth quarter of 1995. New members will want to know that we accumulate revenue of this sort in the club treasury to help fund the work of a student at William & Mary doing research on birds. Many

thanks to WBU!

January Field Trip

With the temperature in the twenties on Saturday morning January 20th it was impressive that thirteen hardy birders showed up for the monthly field trip. They were rewarded by views of three Bald Eagles soaring over Jamestown Island, Hooded Mergansers on College Creek, Yellow-rumped Warblers skating on their private frozen puddle beside the parkway, and forty other species spotted throughout the morning. Chef Bill Sheehan's hot coffee and doughnuts and toasty, warm viewing area were a wonderful climax to the trip. Visiting his varied avian smorgasbord while the group watched were the following additions to the trip list: Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Hairy Woodpecker, Pine Warbler, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Brown Thrasher, White-breasted Nuthatch, and Cedar Waxwings (including one with an orange tail band.) Kudos to everyone — leaders, host, participants! Here's who came: Bob & Joan Brown, Edith Edwards, Marilyn Zeigler, Hugh Beard, Joy Archer, Grace Doyle, Mary Kyle Dupuis, Ann Moore, Tom Ellis, Ann & Dick Storey, Charles & Jean Rend, Lee & Dave Schuster, Bill Sheehan (host.)

Spring Bird Listers Get Ready!

By Bill Holcombe

All members are again invited to participate in this third annual spring listing event. Start looking and listing all of the birds in Virginia that you can identify between March 1 and June 1.

First, pick your category: 1, 2, or 3. Category 1 means "Sort of new to this bird business." A two means "Been at it a while but still need help with things like sparrows, warblers and vireos." A three means "Usually list more than 150 birds a year." Pick up a Virginia Ornithological Institute (VSO) bird list card at the February or March meeting or call Bill Holcombe for one, 229-8057, 4705 Lady Slipper Path, Williamsburg 23188.

Turn in your list before June 10. Results will appear in the June or July FLYER. But, no matter what the results, you will get out more and see more birds. Every bird, new or old, becomes a mark of progress *and pretty soon you will improve your category*. It makes for a wonderful three months of bird watching.

After two years of having fun at this and checking off the high lister cards, here is some helpful advice. Start concentrating on the water fowl at Hog Island, Chippokes State Park, Yorktown, and York State Park. Check out Jolly Pond. You can pick up a lot of local residents while doing this. As the migrating birds start coming cruise the Colonial Parkway and parking areas, take the drive around Jamestown island, check out the bridge on Hickory Sign Post Road, and don't forget Hog Island and York State Park. Some members have also done well in the Newport City Park off Route 143. Then in mid-April we can look for shore birds at places like Hog Island, Craney Island, Back Bay Nature Preserve, and maybe a trip to Chincoteague. The Bay Bridge Tunnel with a stop at Kiptopeke at any time can produce some new birds. In May don't overlook the college campus and Colonial Williamsburg when seeking warblers. Visitors to last year's ornithology conference did very well there.

Field Notes for January

Reports of Tree Sparrows from Mrs. Lambert on Gatehouse Blvd. and Tom Armour from Kingsmill make interesting lead off birds this month. Mrs. Lambert also reported Evening Grosbeakes. The Doyles spotted a Pipit, Horned Lark and Merlin at Camp Perry and they also saw a Snipe after the snowstorm and another was reported along Route 31. Juel Duke reported a Red-breasted Nuthatch in Deerwood as did Wild Birds Unlimited in the middle of town. The Yellow-breasted Chat is still at Mrs. Boggs' in Governor's Land. Cedar Waxwings and Bluebirds were all over the place.

Here are the sightings from our usual haunts as reported by Joy Archer (JA), Tom Armour (TA), Joe & Grace Doyle (J&GD), Juel Duke (JD), Bill Holcombe (BH), Bill Sheehan (BS), Bill Snyder

(BS2), Brian Taber (BT), and Bill Williams (BW).

Jamestown Is./Colonial Pkwy (TA, JA, BS)

Note that the Jamestown Island drives were closed for much of January. Northern Harrier, Sharp-shinned hawk, Cooper's Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk, Killdeer, Hermit Thrush, Brown Thrasher, Red-headed Woodpecker, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Brown Creeper, Fox Sparrow, Great Black-backed Gull.

Hog Is./Chippokes State Park (TA, JA, BS)

Coot, Hooded Merganser, Red-breasted Merganser, Tundra Swan, Green-winged Teal, Shoveler, American Widgeon, Goldeneye, Bufflehead, Bald Eagle, Great Black-backed Gull, Kingfisher, Northern Harrier, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Cooper's Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk. At Chippokes: Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Brown creeper, Fox Sparrow, Phoebe, Hermit Thrush, Pine Warbler, Wild Turkey, Kestrel, and Meadowlark.

Camp Perry (J&GD)

Snipe, Horned Lark, Pipit, Fox Sparrow, Merlin, Killdeer, Phoebe, Bald Eagle, Red-tailed Hawk, Red-shouldered Hawk (*rarely seen here, first in years*), Kestrel, Tundra Swan.

Colonial Pkwy/James River (TA, JA, BS)

Wood Duck (at Glebe Gut), Pied-billed Grebe, Hooded Merganser, Common Merganser, Red-breasted Merganser, Ruddy Duck, Bald Eagle.

York River (TA & BS)

Common Loon, American Widgeon, Canvasback, Common Goldeneye, Ruddy Duck, Bufflehead, Red-breasted Merganser, Tundra Swan, Cormorant.

Feeder's Yards & Miscellaneous

Juel Duke reports Evening Grosbeakes in Deerwood. Bill Sheehan's gourmet feeding stations attracted Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Pine Warbler, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Hairy Woodpecker, Hermit Thrush, Brown Thrasher, Fox Sparrow, Brown Creeper. His Red-shouldered Hawk still comes for raw meat but the Red-breasted Nut-

hatch has defected to neighbor, Brian Tabor. Bill also reported a Mute Swan on Lake Powell. Marilyn Zeigler had a Sharp-shinned Hawk and Evening Grosbeaks in her yard, and Joy Archer a Barred Owl. Bill Holcombe had a Barred Owl most of the month as well as feeder sightings of Purple Finch, Pine Warbler, Pine Siskin and a watching Hermit Thrush. Canada Geese were seen by the Youngs by day, who also heard splashing and loud squawking late at night on College Creek.

Bird of the Month by Bill Holcombe

The Barred Owl (*Strix varia*)

The birding year really starts with the breeding cycle of owls. It begins in January with some courting as early as December. The Great Horned Owl is the earliest and can be sitting on eggs in early February or even late January. Our residents, the Barred Owl and Screech Owl follow a month later. While the Barn Owl was once a resident breeder, the last breeding report was in 1990 and the last sighting 1992.

I have a special reason to focus on the Barred Owl. One has lived in back of our house for several years and has shown himself in mid-afternoon this fall and winter. Early in the morning of January 25 I picked up a Barred Owl that had been killed by a car on John Tyler Highway. As I've neither seen nor heard any evidence of "our" owl since, I'm ready to conclude that it was he that I put into a plastic bag and left in Ruth Beck's office.

Anyone seeing this bird in the daylight is struck by the beauty of its large, soft, brown eyes (most others have yellow eyes), but I can guarantee that the entire bird is absolutely beautiful on close observation. The rich brown coloring of the back and the striping on the breast mixed with creamy feathers, is a very handsome color. Even the feet are handsome. They are plump, neat-looking feet covered with sort of a pebble texture skin and the feathering comes down the legs covering all but the ends of the talons. I think this bird was a male because the female is the larger of the two and this was a smallish Barred Owl. And the fact that

he was two miles from home could indicate another male behavior pattern. The male leaves the basic territory to the female when winter food becomes scarce and takes his hunting beyond their typical one square mile.

Some of the special adaptations of our owl are



common to all three resident species. While all have excellent eyesight for both day and night hunting, the ears are even more remarkable. Located on the sides of the head, the openings are quite large, with a feather arrangement that funnels sound into the ear. The ears are not symmetrically placed on the head and one is larger and of a different shape than the other. This difference permits the owl, as in triangulation, to detect the exact location and distance of the sound

in the dark. The facial disks also help the birds to focus and amplify sound. Experiments show that these owls can hear a mouse squeak fifty yards away. Another adaptation common to all are special wing feathers that make their flight absolutely silent.

The Barred Owl is very common in Virginia and in most of the woodsy eastern half of the United States. They are territorial birds, using an area of about one square mile of old woods and have been observed using the same nest for nine years. Like most owls they don't build nests but use hollowed trees, old nests of the Red-tailed Hawk or even squirrel nests and like heights of 25 to 80 feet. Territorial hooting starts in December or January with courtship in February and egg laying starts in March. Eggs are laid every other day and rarely exceed three. Incubation is done mostly by the female and takes 28 to 33 days. The male is usually nearby but it is not clear whether he feeds the female or sits on the eggs while she hunts. The young leave the nest after five to nine weeks but are not yet able to fly. They cling to tree branches with talons and beak and have been known to use those same tools to climb back up after a fall from a branch. Flight begins between the 12th and 15th week. The family stays together in their territory until the fall when the young leave to search out a new territory. This bird eats most songbirds, mice, rats, squirrels, opossums, fish, large flying insects, smaller owls...almost anything, but does draw the line at the skunks enjoyed by the Great Horned Owl. Mated owls stay together as long as both are alive.

If, in this area, you see a good-sized owl with round head without ear tufts, of a rich, reddish-brown color with bars on the breast and streaks underneath, that's a Barred Owl. The beautiful soft, brown eyes are a positive ID. If you hear an owl hooting in four paired hoots with the last one ending in a slur, you are hearing a barred Owl. Peterson describes this as hoo-hoo, hoo-hoo, hoo-howah and some people convert that to "Who cooks?, Who cooks?, Who cooks?, Who cooks for yooooou!"

I sure hope that a male shows up in the territory behind our house!



(Editor's note: Club members are invited to submit articles like this for publication in the Flyer.