



THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

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NEXT MEETING

Our next meeting is Wednesday, November 20 at 7:30 PM in Room 117 Millington Hall at William & Mary. Bill Williams will bring us up to date on the Kiptopeke station and the hawks which migrated through there this year. You can learn an awful lot about identifying hawks at one of Bill's well-illustrated sessions. Come out and find how to separate the Merlins from the Peregrines.

NOVEMBER FIELD TRIP

On Saturday, November 23 we will venture out to some favored viewing places on the western end of the Colonial Parkway and finish up on Jamestown Island. Julie Hotchkiss will be the leader. We should see some water fowl and maybe some of those elusive Red-headed Woodpeckers known to live on the island. As usual, we will assemble at 7:15 AM in the parking lot at the CW Visitor's Center (right side as you enter) and leave at 7:30 sharp.

SUPER BOWL OF BIRDING

The Wild Birds Unlimited team of Brian Taber, Tom Armour and Bill Williams participated in KESTREL'S 2nd Annual Super Bowl of Birding on September 21. The team found 110 species of birds on the Eastern Shore in an area extending from the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel to Oyster, Virginia. Unusual birds seen were White Ibis, Common Moorhen, Ring-necked Duck, Stilt Sandpiper, Great Cormorant and Sandwich Tern. The team raised \$555 in donations by participating. The entire event raised \$1500. The team

members extend their thanks to Bird Club members who supported their team.

PRESIDENT'S CORNER

Your long lost president is back, just in time to elect our new officers and get everyone ready for the Christmas Bird Count. Be sure to check out the article in this issue about this year's count. Bill Holcombe will head it up this year. He's counting on having lots of help from club members.

I hope you all have been out to see who is arriving in the avian form for the winter and who is heading toward sunnier and warmer parts of the world. My only adventure out was our October field trip. Just a few of us braved the wind. We had a great leader and it was a good trip.

I have taken my students out several times to check the feeders. Thanks to the financial help of the Bird Club, my school was able to establish a bird feeding area and participate in the Cornell Ornithology Lab's Classroom Feeder Watch program. So far there haven't been many birds at the feeders other than House Finches, but one class period received a quick lesson on hawks. We were patiently watching a bushy area when one student looked up to see a large bird flying overhead. With my binoculars I identified it as an Osprey. I was able to help some students see the field marks one needs to look for, not to mention the shape of the wings. About two minutes later another student said "What is that bird?" This time I looked up to see another bird flying really high, a Red-shouldered Hawk. This process continued for another ten minutes. The students saw an immature Bald Eagle, a Red-tailed Hawk, a Black Vulture and a

Turkey Vulture. The students were really excited and finally began to understand why I'm so fascinated with birds. We would not have been able to count those had we been collecting data that day, but it didn't matter because the students got tuned into the birds and talked about it for days. That was a good day!!

We are in for a really interesting program at the club meeting this month. I encourage everyone to come not only for that but because we will be electing officers. People who don't show are nominated for everything!! That's my presidential prerogative. The club is also looking for someone to take on the task of scheduling our field trips.

This person does not have to lead them, but simply organizes and finds leaders for each. Joy Archer, the current field trip coordinator, will help orient her replacement and get him or her started. Think about doing it and volunteer to help the club out.

I have one more request that relates back to the Classroom Feeder Watch Program. If anyone has an old but workable pair of binoculars that are just collecting dust, please consider donating them to the Toano Middle School project. It was amazing the difference the binoculars made when I took mine for students to use. Unfortunately, by the time 24 students had a chance to use them the bird was in its wintering grounds. If anyone can make a donation, please call me at home. See you on November 20! — Lee Schuster

CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

We know the shock you got upon realizing that it is time to plan the 1996 Christmas Bird Count, but that time is here. Our date is Saturday, December 22. This is your last chance of the year to get out in the field with the Bird Club and make a contribution to one of the significant, ongoing measures of what is happening to our bird population. The Christmas Count takes place all over the United States and the results are collected centrally by the Audubon Society. Our club covers eight defined areas and the experienced birder responsible for each of them needs all the eyes and ears that are willing to help. So no matter what your experience level, take a break from TV football, raking leaves and Christmas shopping to share a day, or even half a day, searching out and counting birds that are here. The field day starts at about 7 AM and

ends around 3:30 in the afternoon. Then everyone goes to Millington Hall to combine all the area surveys into one report and to hear the day's "war stories" and birding surprises—there always are some.

The eight areas that are surveyed are: Cheatham Annex, Kingsmill, Hog Island, Jamestown, College Woods, Middle Plantation, Jolly Pond and Skimino. You can volunteer for an area you would particularly like to see or you can ask to be placed where needed. Sign up at the November meeting or call Bill Holcombe, who will be coordinating this year, at 229-8057. Please leave a message on his machine if he's not at home.

Field Notes

The more interesting birds of the month included a Gray-cheeked Thrush and a Swainson's Thrush at Jamestown Island seen by Tom Armour and Bill Sheehan, and another Gray-Cheeked at Camp Peary seen by Grace and Joe Doyle. The Doyles also saw a returning Swamp Sparrow there on 10/13. Marilyn Zeigler saw a Glossy Ibis and a Rose-breasted Grosbeak at Queen's Lake. Armour and Sheehan also spotted a Dunlin and a Stilt Sandpiper at Hog Island. There were also several sightings of our winter residents returning from distant summer nesting grounds. The following dates were reported to Bill Sheehan (If you have dates of earlier sightings you might give him a call): Golden-crowned Kinglet 10/6, Camp Peary; Yellow-bellied Sapsucker 10/14, Kingswood and Jamestown Island; Northern Pintail and American Widgeon 10/19, Greater Scaup 10/24, all at Hog Island; American Coot and Pied-billed Grebe 10/6, and Gadwall 10/20, Camp Peary; Red-breasted Nuthatch 10/24, Hog Island; Junco 10/25, Jamestown Farms; Hermit Thrush 10/27 Jamestown Island and Kingswood; Junco 10/25, Jamestown Farms. Taking note of some departing friends, the last reported Hummingbird sighting was on 10/5.

Jamestown Island/ Jamestown Parkway

Jamestown—Greater Yellowlegs, Caspian Tern, Royal Tern, Screech Owl, Great Horned Owl, Belted Kingfisher, Red-headed Woodpecker, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Tree Swallow, Pine Warbler, Black and White Warbler, Common

Yellowthroat, Brown-headed Nuthatch, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Gray-cheeked Thrush, Swainson's Thrush, Hermit Thrush, Catbird, Brown Thrasher, White-throated Sparrow. Parkway—Tree Swallow, Great Egret, Wood Duck, Bald Eagle, Sharp-shinned Hawk (College Creek).

Ferry/Chippokes/ Hog Island

Ferry—Franklin's Gull, Great Black-backed Gull, Forster's Tern. Chippokes—Cat Bird, Pine Warbler, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Kestrel, Belted Kingfisher. Hog Island—Great Egret, Green-winged Teal, Black Duck, Northern Pintail, Blue-winged Teal, American Widgeon, Greater Scaup, Bald Eagle, Northern Harrier, Clapper Rail, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Dunlin, Stilt Sand-piper, Short-billed Dowitcher, Caspian Tern, Royal Tern, Forster's Tern, Belted Kingfisher, Tree Swallow, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Brown-headed Nuthatch, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Common Yellowthroat, Bobolink.

Camp Peary

Pied-billed Grebe, Great Egret, Mute Swan, Wood Duck, Gadwall, Ruddy Duck, Black Vulture, Bald Eagle, American Coot, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Gray-cheeked Thrush, Pine Warbler, Common Yellowthroat.

OCTOBER FIELD TRIP

The October field trip on the 19th was a story of ten intrepids led by Tom Armour. While the forecast as well as the wild storm the previous night made any trip seem doubtful, we lucked out and ventured on to Hog Island in sunny, though windy conditions. Some fifty species were identified, including Green-winged and Blue-winged Teal, Northern Pintails, Ruddy Ducks, American Widgeon, Osprey, Northern Harrier, Red-tailed Hawk, Bald Eagle, Clapper Rail (Colonial Parkway), Caspian Tern, 300 or 400 Tree Sparrows, Belted Kingfisher, Bobolinks, and Brown-headed Nuthatches. Besides Tom, the participants were Marilyn Zeigler, Lee Schuster, Mike Andrews, Joy Archer, Sue Al-Salam, Jandy & Randy Strickland and Jack & Terry Johnston.

Fall on the Outer Banks

The Pea Island Wild Life Sanctuary on Hatteras

Island was blessed with some lovely weather the last week in October, resulting in some good fall birding. There was a group of 35 American Avocet clustered on a sandbar preparing for the trip south. There was another group, Willets, about the same size, whirling, landing, taking off again and obviously filled with some kind of nervous excitement as they got ready to move on. There were about a dozen Coot clustered in a tight little group that moved about the surface looking like one solid black blob. Large flights of ducks came in frequently. Not having a scope I couldn't be sure what many of them were but there were thousands of Pintails and American Widgeons that I could identify, plus a smattering of Shovelers. Large flocks of Snow Geese were nearby and Tundra Swans were scattered on the fringes of the flock. I constantly thought that I was seeing some interesting fall migrant song birds in the nearby bushes but every one turned out to be a Yellow-rump. They ranged in color from pale tan through brown to the more likely gray with black. Anyhow, it was a lovely day and I recommend to everyone a trip to this birding spot next fall.

Do you especially enjoy a certain birding day every now and then that you would like to share with the rest of us? We'd like to include such accounts in The Flyer. Mail or call Phil Young (229-8556) or me (229-8057) and give us the details. We'll write it up for you if you wish. Bill Holcombe

Birds of the Month

The American Widgeon, the Northern Pintail and the Green-winged Teal

The return of wintering waterfowl can be as exciting as the arrival of the spring songbird migrants. Getting out to see them can offer the same kind of pleasure. We'll focus on these three birds because they all arrive early and have several other things in common. First, they are all surface feeding ducks which forage by "tipping up" and* feeding with their tails pointing to the sky. All are non-diving, fresh water ducks. Our area is one of their wintering residences and their northern

breeding grounds are quite similar.

Where did they come from before arriving here? The vast majority of American Widgeon breed in Alaska, western Canada and western United States, and summer in California and Mexico. Smaller numbers also summer on lakes and ponds scattered along southern Ontario, Quebec and New Brunswick. The latter are the most likely sources of birds arriving here. Most of the Green-winged Teal are also western but these ducks breed even more extensively throughout Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick and even farther north into Newfoundland. The Pintail's breeding range is almost identical. So these three ducks most likely arrive here from somewhere in eastern Canada. And they arrive with the fruits of a summer breeding season. Studies show that successful nests are in the 60 percent range with an average of five ducklings surviving from each of those nests to join the flight south.

These ducks choose new mates each season and the courtship rituals begin almost with their arrival here. Usually the males and females migrate south in separate flocks. Immature males accompany the females. Social displays start when the flocks merge on the winter grounds. Breeding commences the first year, so all new and returning ducks engage in the process of mate selection. The selection is largely completed by February or March but the remaining unattached males and females continue their social attracting rituals even while they are flying north. One study mentions widgeon hens reaching back laterally to "bill" one of the chasing males. (Sorry, the book did not explain what is meant by "to bill.")

At the nesting grounds, once the females are fertilized and egg laying begins, the males pretty much go about their own business and leave the hatching and care of the young to the females. However, if nests are destroyed they form a couple again until another clutch of eggs is laid. The survival rate of hatched ducklings among these ducks is higher than that of many other breeds studied. That result is credited to the cunning and ferocity of the hens in protecting their young from predators. On the down side, annual mortality rate for these birds in studies made prior to 1975 was about 50 percent, based on returned band data.

Now for some differences between these ducks: The Green-winged Teal is by far the smallest, 14", and weighs just less than a pound. Next comes the Widgeon at 21" and weighing 1-3/4 to 2 pounds. Then comes the Pintail at 25" and 2 to 3 pounds.

The essential male field marks for the Teal include a gray body with a vertical white stripe toward the front and a cinnamon colored head with a broad, an iridescent green stripe on the sides of the head, extending from the eye to the base of the neck.

The Widgeon has a brown body with a white patch in front of the black tail and a gray head with a broad white strip from the bill back over the head. The gray head has a patch of green and the bill is blue. The Pintail has the identifying long-pointed tail, a grayish body with a blacker back and a clear white breast patch extending in crescents up to the back of the head.

All of these ducks can frequently be found this time of the year at Hog Island, Cheatham Annex, Jamestown Island, Jolly Pond, Camp Peary, York River and it's creeks and, occasionally, in almost any of the fresh water ponds and creeks scattered about the peninsula.

References for this article include, Waterfowl of North America by Paul Johnsgard, The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds, and Peterson's Field Guide to Eastern Birds.