



# THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

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## PRESIDENT'S CORNER

HAPPY NEW YEAR! I hope everyone's holidays were relaxing and fun and that your new year has started out on the right foot. The weather certainly cooperated and the birds did too. A Painted Bunting made an appearance in Williamsburg.

As you make your plans for the new year I hope you will include time with the Bird Club. We have many talented members who hide and don't spread their expertise around. This expertise may include attending our field trips, bringing drinks and/or cookies to the meetings, contributing to the newsletter, calling in birds seen in the yard or surrounding area, leading field trips, or simply attending our monthly meetings. In other words, we want to meet you and share our common interest in birds. Don't be a "closet birder." If you have any ideas, recommendations, suggestions for field trips, ideas for meeting topics, or thoughts on ways the club can be made better in the interest of birds, please let an officer know. Our phone numbers are on the back of the newsletter, so feel free to call with any ideas.

I hope to see you soon at some of our favorite places checking the birds out. See you all at the January meeting for sure!

## DUES TIME

With the new year it's time to remind everyone to pay his or her dues once again. There's no increase—in fact, the dues haven't increased since 1993. We hope more members will see the way clear to taking on a patron membership (\$25) this time. In 1996 we had eight patron members and their extra support is sincerely appreciated. Please

mail your check to Charles Rend, the Treasurer, in the enclosed envelope. Otherwise, bring a check to him at the next meeting.

Your treasurer reports that the club continues to operate with a positive cash flow. Publishing *The Flyer* is our single largest expense, but we also support the Nature Conservancy, the VSO (Virginia Society of Ornithology), the Williamsburg Regional Library and the annual student grant. Last year we were able to make first-time donations to K.E.St.R.E.L. and to the Toano Middle School for its feeder watch program. Our membership continues to grow. In 1993 dues payers numbered 116. Last year there were 136. We look forward to another good year in 1997.

## NEXT MEETING

Our next meeting will be on Wednesday, January 15 at 7:30 pm in Room 117 Millington Hall, College of William and Mary. Our speaker will be Mitchell Byrd. He will relate some new research to compare recovery rates of the Osprey and the Bald Eagle, their current status and outlook for the future.

## JANUARY FIELD TRIP

On Saturday, January 18, Tom Armour, our new field trip coordinator, will lead a trip south along the Colonial Parkway and York River in search of water fowl. As usual the group will meet in the parking lot to the right of the CW Visitor Center. *New time though — let's gather at 7:45 AM for a 8:00 departure.*

## CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

How did we do? We did OK. We had 27 participants in the field. We recorded 104 species and counted 174,281 birds. We thawed out from absolute zero standing on the banks of the James at 7 AM to an almost normal temperature by 10:30. The real heros started owling at 5 a.m. to count some hooters before tackling the rest at 7 a.m.. We had a most enjoyable and satisfying day.... And some of us were sound asleep by 7:30 after wandering around the boonies all day.

Now for some details: This was the Williamsburg Bird Club's 20th participation in the Christmas Bird Count. (Ruth Beck and Bill Williams led the way 20 years ago.) It was Audubon's 97th CBC and they have already started planning to do something special in 1999 when the 100th CBC is held.

Our record keeper and statistician, Bill Sheehan had some observations after looking at this year's count. Our species count of 104 compares to a low of 97 in 1982 and a high of 115 in 1984. Last year we listed 109. Our average is 108. Some of the surprisingly missing birds were no Pintails for the first time in our 20 years. Also at zero for the count were Fish Crows, Red-breasted Nuthatches, Pine Siskins and Evening Grosbeaks. And the Purple Finches barely escaped the zero category when a single bird was spotted by one field group.

There were also some strong showings. A count of 16 Winter Wrens beat the previous high of 15 and were reported in six of our nine search areas. Twelve Screech Owls was a very strong number although as usual Cheatham Annex accounted for most of these. The 12 Great Horned Owl count set no records but showed strength. The 471 Hooded Mergansers was a new high for the species and a raft of over 100,000 Ruddy Ducks on the York River formed a base for the over 150,000 seen. Another strong duck showing was the Gadwall count of 132 with 100 coming from Hog Island. The Robin number of 582 was better than some years but out-classed by a previous 4,000 plus count back in the '80's but Robins do seem to be all over the place.

But there are also other declining numbers to report. Just five Pine Warblers represents an all time low count. Two Chipping Sparrows is a very low figure. Five Kestrels is disturbingly low and

both Kinglet numbers continued to decline as they have for the past several years. We won't have any overall analysis until about this time next year as the Audubon proceedings for the '95 CBC were just received.

Here is the list of participants and the areas that they covered presented in the random order in which they checked in:

**Camp Peary** — Tom Armour, Grace and Joe Doyle, Emily Sharrett

**Hog Island** — Brian Taber and Randy and Jandy Strickland

**Middle Plantation** — (A band across the peninsula from the James River to Waller Mill Park)

Marilyn Zeigler, Bill Holcombe, Barbara Luck, Dick Mahone, Tom McCary, John McDowell

**Skimino** — (Route 60 from Airport Road north to Toano and East to the York River) Bettye Fields, Theresa Dunn, Ann Moore, Mary Pulley

**Jamestown Island** — Dot Silsby, Eddie Wilson

**Kingsmill** — Paul and Carol McAllister

**Jolly Pond** — Dave and Lee Schuster

**College Woods** — Ruth Beck and Elaine Mertus

**Cheatham Annex** — Bill Williams, Hugh Beard, Bobbie and Ron Giese

What were some of the **surprises pleasant?** One Cooper's Hawk, Hog Island; 2 Woodcock, College Woods and Jamestown Island; 1 Marsh Wren, Hog Island; 1 Catbird, Hog Island; 1 Common Yellowthroat, College Woods; 1 American Tree Sparrow, Hog Island; 2 White Crowned Sparrows, Cheatham Annex; 3 Northern Orioles, 2 at Cheatham Annex and 1, Jamestown Island. And we might throw in the fact that five Redheaded Woodpeckers were seen outside of Jamestown Island by the Middle Plantation group!

What Birds Did **all** Groups See? There were just 23 birds on all reports: Great Blue Heron, Mallard, Ring-billed Gull, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Downey Woodpecker, Northern Flicker, American Crow, Carolina Chickadee, Carolina Wren, Eastern Bluebird, Hermit Thrush, Northern Mockingbird, Starling, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Northern Cardinal, Rufous-sided Towhee, Song Sparrow, White-throated Sparrow, Dark-eyed Junco, Red-winged Blackbird, and Goldfinch.

Missing complete representation by just one zero

count out of the nine areas were House Finch, Cedar Waxwing, American Robin, White-breasted Nuthatch, Tufted Titmouse, Blue Jay, Pileated Woodpecker, Mourning Dove, Red-tailed Hawk, Bald Eagle (immature), Turkey Vulture, Canada Goose, Double-crested Cormorant.

## OUT WHERE THE BIRDS BEGIN

by Marilyn Zeigler

North of San Francisco lies Point Reyes National Seashore, geologically a hilly chunk of Pacific Plate which creeps northward west of the San Andreas Fault. This is haven to an enticing array of birds in a variety of habitats. Once a year an Elderhostel group is invited to stay at the Youth Hostel, formerly a ranch house, for four days of intensive birding guided by three topnotch naturalists.

On a dazzling day in early December, 18 persons guided by Marin County naturalists surveyed the slopes around the hostel. A resident Red-shouldered Hawk sat for a long time nearby. White-crowned Sparrows were numerous and a White-throat was a rarity. Chestnut-backed Chickadees appeared rather secretive, lacking a whistled song. Hutton's Vireo and Golden-crowned Sparrows stayed low in the scrub. Berwick's Wren was not a rarity and my great favorite, the Townsend's Warbler, with it's dazzling black and yellow facial patterns was not uncommon.

After lunch we turned toward Limntour Beach and we walked out it's three mile spit on the inner dune side with estuarine bays to the right (esteros). There were familiar ducks, Ring-necked, Canvasback, Gadwall, Cinnamon and Green-winged Teal, Buffleheads, with many Coots and Western and Pied Billed Grebes scattered through them. Waders included lots of Marbled Godwit, Dunlin, Black-bellied Plovers, Long-billed Curlews, and Black Turnstones. Our guide knew a marsh where a Marsh Wren immediately popped up and Virginia Rail ran in view. More Townsend Warblers and Yellowthroats lived near shore. Returning on the ocean side, we walked a fine beach once faced by Sir Francis Drake, who careened the Golden Hind in Drake's Estero for repairs. Surf and White-winged Scoters, and

Common and Red-throated Loons sat offshore. A Harbor Seal joined us. Saw 77 birds for the day.

Next day was mild and cloudy, perfect viewing for thousands of ducks and waders in Bolinas Lagoon. We talked with banders from the Point Reyes Bird Observatory, where our leader, Jules Evans, author of Natural History of Point Reyes, is a research associate. First we walked a wooded area behind the marsh with live oak, bay trees and coyote bush in bloom. Resident was Anna's Hummingbird and wintering there were varied Thrushes. Nearby in a pasture Snipe sat next to Canada Geese of two sizes, the smaller being the Aleutian minima. In the lagoon a few Asian Widgeon spiced the population, a Peregrine flew past, Godwits, Avocets and Whimbrels were there at short range. For the first time, I compared a Barrow's Goldeneye with the Common. A seven-foot tide affects the area. Stinson Beach, famed for surfers and great white sharks, is nearby.

By Wednesday a typical California mist was closing in. Rich Stallcup took us to a Monterey pine grove overlooking Drake's Beach where he has long monitored Great Horned Owls. Two, visibly, slumbered there. The male, "Caruso," has been observed for 13 years with a succession of mates and offspring. Owl pellets reveal a diet of shrews, meadow mice, potato bugs and pockets gophers. This was also the spot to sort out seven kinds of gulls, Bonapartes, Heermans, (nice red bill), Mew, Ring-billed, California, Herring and Western. Harbor seals lay below amid the kelp and Pelagic Cormorants kept to a particular rock. Also seen were a Golden Eagle, Ravens, ducks, grebes and loons. Later in a dairy pasture Tri-colored Blackbirds were showing white shoulder marks below the less obvious red patch.

On our final day, inland in Bear Valley, we walked a wooded trail where the fence was broken and displaced in the 1906 earthquake, a textbook illustration. California Quail, Acorn Woodpeckers, Steller, as well as Scrub Jays, a Ferruginous Hawk. Also on my list is an eight inch banana slug! We tapered off by walking around a West Marin Reservoir where a park attracted Nuttall' Woodpeckers, Red-breasted Sapsuckers, Bush Tits, Plain Titmouse (less fawny than ours), another Peregrine, and a Cooper's Hawk. A White-tailed Kite sat observing the scene from a



low bluff. For me, I saw 130 species in all, thirteen entirely new — a wonderful birding trip!

*Marilyn, we thank you for sharing this lively description of a trip that we all can envy and put on our "someday" list! Do other members have memories of a birding experience that stands out in their minds? We would like to include such descriptions in future Flyers. Please give one of us your story, or notes if you prefer, at a meeting or mail it to editor Phil Young, 26 The Palisades, Williamsburg, VA 23185*

## BIRD OF THE MONTH

### **Grebes: Pied-billed, Horned and Red-necked** **by Bill Holcombe**

These Grebes are among those fall migrants that arrive in our area in late fall and spend the winter here. The Pied-billed is by far the most common. The Horned Grebe can usually be found if you really set out to see this bird. The Red-necked Grebe is considered an unusual presence most winters on the York River but it may take some real persistence to get this one in your binoculars with only 23 sightings in the club listing records. Their cousins, the Western Grebe and the Eared Grebe live pretty much on the other side of the Mississippi and are accidental in these parts.

This an interesting group of birds both in their appearance and their life histories. Peterson describes the group as, "Duck-like divers with thin necks, small heads, lobed toes and a tail-less appearance. All but the Pied Billed have pointed bills. Sexes are alike. It may dive from the surface or submerge." That word "submerge" seemed strange until I read further in "A Natural History of American Birds" that Grebes can go swiftly under water by dropping backwards into the water. This is done so quickly that they appear to just drop beneath the surface. They can also swim with only their heads showing above the water. In fact, they have been observed, when frightened, to swim under water to reed beds and to lie there concealed with only the bills and tops of the heads out of water. Of course, they can also dive forward to go under water head first.

They breed from eastern Siberia, across Alaska and Canada and the northern states in the center of the USA. They winter down both the Pacific and

Atlantic coasts. The Horned and Red-necked Grebes are at home in both fresh water and salt and will migrate in flocks two miles out to sea, whereas the Pied-billed Grebe is strictly a fresh water inhabitant. Grebes have interesting courtship and mating displays, including such things as rushing across the top of the water side by side and standing almost upright. There are also reports of diving rituals ending with both birds facing one another with a strip of eel grass in each bill. Even the eggs are unusual. They are white, which is rare among wild birds, except for those that nest in tree cavities. Mottled and colored eggs aid in survival as they are better hidden from predators. However, Grebes always cover their eggs with vegetation debris when leaving the nest. That does the camouflaging trick without any genetic adaptations. The young can swim and dive immediately after birth. Like loons, the young climb up on the mother's back when threatened. She even gathers them under her wings and dives with them in the face of predators.

Our records only show 23 sightings of the Red-necked Grebe (and that coincides with authors who describe the bird as elusive and shy ) so we aren't sure about its arrival and departure dates. However, the Pied Billed and Horned Grebes arrive in October and some of them are here through April . The Pied-billed is scattered throughout our area. When you see a small 12-inch bird with a round knobby head and a stubby bill swimming about on Lake Matoka or Lake Powell or on either river or the creeks leading to it, you're most likely looking at a Pied-billed Grebe. It somehow gives the impression of being an immature duck that never grew up. It is a mousy colored bird with white showing under the tail feathers. In breeding plumage it develops a black ring around its bill and a black patch under its throat.

The Horned Grebe gets up to 15 inches long. It has the vertical Grebe neck and in the winter shows a white front that extends up into the head until it meets a sharply defined black cap. The white neck extends in a light swatch along the bird's water line with a much darker back and sides. In breeding plumage the light colored neck and sides become a reddish, chestnut color and the bird grows magnificent golden ear tufts. The tufts are set off not only by the black cap, but also by

black cheek patches. If you see this bird in its winter plumage, it is worth a trip back to the site in April to see what a magnificent bird it has become. The York River, from York River State Park to Yorktown Beach, is where you are most likely to see the Horned Grebe. The Fellgate turn-off is an especially good place to look for them. You'll certainly see the Pied-billed there and if the moon is in the right quarter, your biorhythms are right and you found a four-leaf clover in your driveway, you might see a Red-necked Grebe too. In winter the Red-necked Grebe has the gray-white coloring of the Horned cousin, but the long, erect neck is gray with a white patch running from ear-to-ear around the throat. The bird is larger, 18 inches long, with a longer, sharper bill. In breeding plumage the neck turns red. The white, ear-to-ear throat patch is brilliant and sets off the shiny black cap. May you have the pleasure of the Bird Club's 24th sighting of this bird.

## 1996 Williamsburg Bird Club Christmas Count

Species	Total	Species	Total	Species	Total
Red-throated Loon	0	Lesser Yellowlegs	0	Yellow-Rumped Warbler	255
Common Loon	7	Western Sandpiper	0	Pine Warbler	5
Pied-Billed Grebe	28	Dunlin	2	Palm Warbler	0
Horned Grebe	10	Short-billed Dowitcher	0	Common Yellowthroat	0
Double-Crested Cormorant	331	Common Snipe	0	Northern Cardinal	188
Great Blue Heron	121	American Woodcock	2	Rufous-Sided Towhee	61
Great Egret	32	Laughing Gull	11	American Tree Sparrow	1
Black-crowned Night Heron	0	Bonaparte's Gull	6	Chipping Sparrow	2
Tundra Swan	89	Ring-Billed Gull	1516	Field Sparrow	153
Mute Swan	14	Herring Gull	248	Vesper Sparrow	0
Snow Goose	1	Greater Black-Backed Gull	84	Savannah Sparrow	25
Canada Goose	725	gull sp.	8	Fox Sparrow	9
Wood Duck	11	Forster's Tern	15	Song Sparrow	418
Green-winged Teal	22	Rock Dove	127	Swamp Sparrow	191
American Black Duck	158	Mourning Dove	106	White-Throated Sparrow	807
Mallard	184	Eastern Screech Owl	12	White-Crowned Sparrow	2
Northern Pintail	12	Great Horned Owl	12	Dark-Eyed Junco	618
Northern Shoveler	14	Barred Owl	3	Red-Winged Blackbird	39M
Gadwall	132	Belted Kingfisher	21	Eastern Meadowlark	58
American Wigeon	27	Red-headed Woodpecker	12	Rusty Blackbird	0
Canvasback	394	Red-Bellied Woodpecker	71	Common Grackle	1065
Redhead	2	Yellow-Bellied Sapsucker	15	Brown-Headed Cowbird	60
Ring-Necked Duck	305	Downy Woodpecker	38	black/bird, sp.	2158
Greater Scaup	42	Hairy Woodpecker	4	Northern Oriole	3
Lesser Scaup	200	Northern Flicker	75	Purple Finch	1
scaup sp.	0	Pileated Woodpecker	24	House Finch	113
Oldsquaw	0	Eastern Phoebe	3	Pine Siskin	0
Common Goldeneye	64	Horned Lark	0	Goldfinch	148
Bufflehead	131	Blue Jay	147	Evening Grosbeak	0
Hooded Merganser	471	American Crow	201	House Sparrow	41
Common Merganser	0	Fish Crow	0	<b>Total</b>	<b>104</b>
Red-Breasted Merganser	27	crow sp.	18		
Ruddy Duck	152M	Carolina Chickadee	133		
duck, sp.	1032	Tufted Titmouse	70		
Black Vulture	7	Red-Breasted Nuthatch	0		
Turkey Vulture	145	White-Breasted Nuthatch	38		
Bald Eagle (Adult)	6	Brown-Headed Nuthatch	17		
Bald Eagle (Immature)	20	Brown Creeper	7		
Northern Harrier	3	Carolina Wren	55		
Sharp-Shinned Hawk	4	House Wren	5		
Cooper's Hawk	1	Winter Wren	16		
Red-shouldered Hawk	8	Marsh Wren	1		
Red-tailed Hawk	13	Golden-Crowned Kinglet	46		
Rough-legged Hawk	0	Ruby-Crowned Kinglet	26		
American Kestrel	5	Eastern Bluebird	209		
Ring-Necked Pheasant	0	Hermit Thrush	19		
Wild Turkey	7	American Robin	582		
Northern Bobwhite	15	Gray Catbird	1		
Clapper Rail	0	Northern Mockingbird	29		
Sora	0	Brown Thrasher	19		
American Coot	33	Water Pipit	0		
Killdeer	87	Cedar Waxwing	553		
American Avocet	0	Starling	927		
Greater Yellowlegs	0	Orange-crowned Warbler	0		