



THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

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NEXT MEETING

Our next meeting will be Wednesday, February 19 at 7:30 in Room 117 in Millington Hall on the William and Mary campus. Our own Ruth Beck will present a program drawing on her successful long term efforts to find and maintain adequate nesting sights for colonial shore birds.

NEXT FIELD TRIP

On Saturday, February 22, Brian Taber will lead a field trip to Hog Island. As usual the group will assemble in the parking lot at the C.W. Visitor Center (lot to the right as you drive in) at 7:15 AM, and leave at 7:30 sharp.

PRESIDENT'S CORNER

Happy February, Groundhog Day, President's Day and Bird Day! If you are wondering what this is all about, every day is bird day because you never go without seeing something. I am still looking for those Evening Grosbeaks but my time is running out. If they miss us on the front end of winter, maybe they will catch us the back end. They have been spotted in Georgia and other southern states so maybe, just maybe.

My feeders have been really busy at home and at school. I would like to see more activity but I think they have reached the peak. I would not mind one good snow on a weekend to keep me at the window for the day. Since I participate in the Cornell feeder Watch Program, I do some record keeping. I've noticed that the colder days are definitely the busier days for birds.

As we draw closer to Spring things will begin to

change quickly and the volume will increase on the songs that we hear. Without notice the birthing season has begun with Great Horned Owls and several others. We can't forget the ducks that are still with us along with many others that will be gone before we know it. If weather permits, and many members can get out during the week, visit the usual places like the Parkway to Yorktown and Jamestown Island to catch the variety of birds that winter here. When you do, don't forget to call up Bill Sheehan, our master record keeper and clue him into whatever you see. As you watch keep an eye out for those birds sneaking through on an early return north. If it were not for Sam Hart's keen eyes we would not have known of the beautiful Painted Bunting that surprised Williamsburg in January.

Happy birding — Lee

JANUARY FIELD TRIP

January is supposed to be cold. And it was on the 18th, all over the peninsula, but nowhere was it colder than the south bank of the York River. Tom Armour had gathered the hardy few there: Hugh Beard, Carolyn Lowe, Richard Stanley and Marilyn Zeigler. With a chill factor of minus 2° it was hard to keep the glasses on target while we looked for ducks and other water fowl, but this rugged group came up with 38 birds. There were thousands of Ruddy Ducks, lots Canvasbacks and Bufflehead and a smattering of Widgeon, Ring-necks, Goldeneye, Hooded Mergansers, Lesser Scaup and a Red-breasted Merganser. Also on the water were Tundra Swans, Common Loons, Pied-billed and Horned Grebes and a Northern Gannett with a Bonaparte and some Great Black-backed

Gulls joining the ever present Ringbill and Herring Gulls. They also saw bunches of Cedar Waxwings and actually had a good time!

FIELD NOTES

An outstanding delight for those lucky enough to see it was the Painted Bunting in Sam and Katherine Hart's back yard. It appeared off and on from January 5 to January 11. Along with the Harts, Lee Schuster and Brian Taber actually got to enjoy this sighting. Tom Armour and Ruth Beck tried but were never in the right place at the right time. This was a wonderful bit of excitement during a cold bit of January weather. There were still no signs of visiting Evening Grosbeaks but reports pretty well cover all of our other winter visiting song birds—the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Brown Creeper, Winter Wren, both Kinglets, Hermit Thrush, Cedar Waxwing, Fox Sparrow, Swamp Sparrow and Purple Finch. And most of the winter water birds are in the report.

Jamestown Island / Parkway (James River):

Pied-billed Grebe, Wood Duck, Ring-necked Duck, Goldeneye, Hooded Merganser, Bald Eagle, Cooper's Hawk, King Rail, Killdeer, Great Horned Owl, Kingfisher, Red-headed Woodpecker, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Hairy Woodpecker, Pileated Woodpecker, Brown Creeper, Winter Wren, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Hermit Thrush, Brown Thrasher, Cedar Waxwing, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Pine Warbler, Fox Sparrow, Swamp Sparrow.

Hog Island / Chippokes: Great Black-backed Gull, Great Egret, Tundra Swan, Mute Swan, Green-winged Teal, Black Duck, Ring-necked Duck, Lesser Scaup, Bufflehead, Hooded Merganser, Red-breasted Merganser, Ruddy Duck, Gadwall, Black Vulture, Northern Harrier, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Cooper's Hawk, Kingfisher, Yellow-rumped Warbler. **Chippokes** Bald Eagle, Kestrel, Red-breasted Merganser, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Swamp Sparrow, Meadowlark, Rusty Blackbird.

York River (See January field trip)

Camp Peary: Pied-billed Grebe, Tundra Swan, Gadwall, Canvasback, Ring-necked Duck,

Common Goldeneye, Bufflehead, Hooded Merganser, Ruddy Duck, Black Vulture, Bald Eagle, Red-shouldered Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk, Kestrel, American Coot, Rufous-sided Towhee, Eastern Meadowlark, Eastern Phoebe.

Kingsmill: Mute Swan, Ring-necked Duck, Canvasback, Hooded Merganser, Red-breasted Merganser, Wild Turkey, Bonaparte's Gull, Barred Owl, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Hairy Woodpecker, Pileated Woodpecker, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Hermit Thrush, Cedar Waxwing, Towhee, Purple Finch.

Miscellaneous and Neighborhoods: Kingswood had a Great Horned Owl, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Pileated Woodpecker, Ruby-crowned and Golden-crowned Kinglets, Pine Warbler, Hermit Thrush, Brown Thrasher, Cedar Waxwing. The Winter Wren, Hermit Thrush, Towhee and Brown Thrasher were seen in Graylin Woods and while Lee Schuster keeps a lookout for the Evening Grosbeaks which have not yet appeared, she has seen some Purple Finches.

TIME FOR THE BIRD LISTING SWEEPSTAKES!

March 1 marks the beginning of a three-month search in which we take a last look at the departing winter birds and get the first glimpse of returning tropic migrants. If you'd like to play a game that a handful of us enjoy every spring, pick a goal of how many birds you think that you can list by the end of May. Then get a Virginia Society of Ornithology listing card from Bill Holcombe and mail it back to Bill at the beginning of June. List all of the birds that you identify in Virginia. If you can squeeze in a date and general area so much the better. Mark your card with a 1 for being relatively new to birding. Give it a 2 if you expect to list 75 or more. If you expect to list more than 175 species, you're a 3. Record your goal on the front of the card before you start. Now don't expect some special contribution to ornithology out of this. The idea is to have some fun and to provide an incentive to spend more time in the field.

What do you win? If this kind of a self-driven contest moves you to get out to the rivers and ponds in March to see the water fowl before they

head north, and then has you up at daybreak to catch the rising April sun splashing off of a Prothonotary Warbler, then you've just become a winner. Then make sure that you get to Craney Island in May to "collect" the vast array of shore birds to be found there. Then you've still got a chance to finish with a flourish by participating in the all-day Spring Count in mid-May. Some of us believe that we get out more, see more and get a special pleasure out of beating the record of the previous spring's count. The results appear in the June *Flyer*.

THE MIGRANTS ARE COMING!

Bill Sheehan's Year End Summary of local bird sightings is included with this *Flyer*. That document reveals many interesting facts including the identities of the migrants with March sighting dates. While this does not mean that they *always* show up in March, it is an indicator of the early returnees. Here they are: Snowy Egret, Tricolored Heron, Cattle Egret, Spotted Sandpiper, Caspian Tern, Royal Tern, Eastern Wood-peewee, Purple Martin, Northern Rough-winged Swallow, Bank Swallow, Barn Swallow and Veery. Highlighting the March arriving warblers, they are: **Northern Parula, Yellow-throated Warbler, Prairie Warbler, Black and White Warbler, Ovenbird, Louisiana Waterthrush and Yellow-breasted Chat.**

Then there is a group of migratory birds that show up as infrequent winter visitors. Because they've been seen in every month of the year they don't have "a month of arrival" reported. This group, which despite their occasional year 'round sightings, are actually migrants who will be arriving in numbers soon. They include the Greater Yellowlegs, Blue-Gray Gnatcatcher, Gray Catbird, Eastern Phoebe, Brown Thrasher, Tree Swallow, House Wren, Marsh Wren, Chipping Sparrow, Pine Warbler, Yellow-rumped Warbler, and Common Yellowthroat. Put 'em all on your early list.

Don't forget to clean your bird nesting boxes if you haven't yet done that chore already. AND, Ruth Beck says please dust the inside of the box with sulfur powder to hold down the problem of mites attacking young birds.

BIRDS OF THE MONTH

Who keeps some life in our empty winter woods better than the woodpeckers? Oh, they get help from the Nuthatches, Chickadees, Titmice, Carolina Wrens and Goldfinches but all except the Wrens can be rather quiet in December, January, February. The Red-bellied Woodpeckers never stop calling and the Pileated adds his cheerful cackle on many mornings. The call of the Flicker can add bird noise to the silence. And the sound of woodpeckers drumming can give our still woods a sense of life and purpose. The bright red pate of the Red-bellied can be the brightest thing that we see on the feeder all winter. And the Downey always seems to be a cheerful and businesslike visitor to the suet cake. So it seems appropriate to take a look at this cheerful group for February.

EXOTIC SANIBEL ISLAND

by Shirley Devan

Certainly close to the top of any East Coast birder's list of "wants to visit" ought to be Sanibel Island and its world famous J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge. Located in the Gulf of Mexico just off the coast of Fort Myers, Florida, Sanibel is most famous for its shells and beaches. It is a barrier island with 12 miles of beaches on the gulf side, unusual because its axis is directed east-west instead of the usual north-south. Almost half of the island is undeveloped and "the other half was developed with considerable forethought for the first half." Sanibel is a really small community that has succeeded in limiting development, one reason why it is such a grand birding destination.

There are several reasons why Sanibel attracts so many birds:

- Sanibel boasts the protected land of the Darling National Wildlife Refuge and its 5000+ acres, about 40% of Sanibel's total acreage. About 800,000 people visit the refuge each year.
- Sanibel is near the southern end of Florida and thus is the terminus for many migratory birds on the Atlantic flyway.

- As a barrier island it is a convenient stopover for migrants headed to South and Central America and a haven for storm-blown birds
- Sanibel has several different habitats in a small area — beach, dune, freshwater wetland, coastal ridge woodland and mangrove swamp.

According to the Wildlife Refuge brochure there are approximately 290 species of birds, over 50 types of reptiles and at least 32 different mammals. The crown jewel of Sanibel is the J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge. Ding Darling first saw Sanibel in 1936 and he was influential in having the Sanibel National Wildlife Refuge established in 1945. He was active in conservation efforts on Sanibel until he died in 1962. In 1967 the refuge was renamed for him. "Ding" Darling was a Pulitzer-prize winning cartoonist for the Des Moines Register and his cartoons often contained a pro-conservation bias long before it was popular. Franklin D. Roosevelt recognized his work and appointed him Director of the U.S. Bureau of Biological Survey which later became the Fish and Wildlife Service. Darling also founded the National Wildlife Federation and began the federal duck stamp program 1934.

So what is the refuge itself like? Compared to what we are accustomed to in Virginia, Sanibel is an exotic, tropical paradise. Many of the birds, trees and plants we saw were "out of this world" and we were seeing them for the first time. So I tried to spend as much time as possible out at the refuge, knowing that my bird identification skills would improve with time. The learning curve was very steep because there were so many of each kind of bird. I felt I had lots of practice identifying herons and egrets and telling the difference between a Wood Stork and a White Ibis because they were all over the place—and so close that I often didn't need binoculars. Also, many of the birds were very large and caught my attention more easily than the smaller birds. I saw many birds I could not identify and wished that I had the resource of a local birder helping me identify what I was seeing. Sanibel Island and the Darling Wildlife Refuge are wondrous places where even the casual wildlife observer can be enthralled (as my husband was—for about an hour!) and the Type-A birder can find thrills and chills day after

day. I spent many hours there during our five day stay, often making two visits a day. In each visit there was something new to see and I couldn't wait to go back again.

The Refuge changes hourly depending on the tide, the time of day or the weather. Our first visit was on a Sunday morning about 9:30. My husband, Steve, and I arrived at the visitor center and were advised to get out on the Wildlife Drive as soon as we could because it was low tide, the best time to see wildlife. So we postponed our tour of the visitor center and immediately set out on the five mile, one-way drive through the swamps and bays. The tail end of a hurricane was just passing through and it was windy, overcast and cool. We encountered a volunteer naturalist early on the drive. He oriented us to what we were about to see and let us know that he had been to Williams-burg and Jamestown. He pointed out several different species of herons out in the mud. Steve spotted a Roseate Spoonbill flying in but he, like many people, called it a Flamingo. The naturalist allowed as how the only Flamingoes we were likely to see there would be escapees from Busch Gardens up in Tampa! But the Spoonbills were enough to prompt him to drag his scope out of the trunk and we watched several more Spoonbills fly in for breakfast on the mud flats.

He chatted a bit longer about the refuge, all the time pointing out this heron or that egret. The most memorable thing he told us was that the Darling National Wildlife Refuge does not have a full time naturalist or biologist. The last one left to take a job elsewhere and they decided not to fill his position. "Can you imagine," he said, "the crown jewel of the National Wildlife Refuge system with no biologist?" Indeed. I'm sure there are paid professionals who work there but throughout my visits over the next four days I saw only volunteers. So, it was clear that if I was going to learn about the birds in the Ding Darling Refuge, I was on my own!. Luckily, my field guide came through most of the time. The droves of other birders there were friendly and always willing to share their finds. I quickly discovered that there were birders there from all around the world. And like me, many didn't have a clue about the strange and wonderful birds we were viewing. They were paging through their field

guides as desperately too.

The one-way drive along the bay side of Sanibel Island is about four car-widths wide with parking area pullouts and foot trails along the way. Made of packed sand and shells, the road is actually an earthen dike. It was built in the 1960's for mosquito control by manipulating the water levels on the two sides. Controlling the water level has since been found to benefit migrating waterfowl. Fishing and canoeing are allowed on the bay side but swimming is not recommended. Too many alligators!

I had no trouble spotting the serious birders on the road because they had scopes! To tell the truth though, many birds (and alligators) were close enough to see without one. Even binoculars were not always needed. Believe it or not, the birds are accustomed to cars and people. So long as all the people stay on the road or the trails, the birds are not spooked.

So what birds did I see? Here is a partial list, mostly at the Wildlife Refuge:

Wood Stork	White Pelican
Brown pelican	Frigate Bird
Pied-billed grebe	Anhinga
Common Gallinule	Cormorant
Kingfisher	Terns
Reddish Egrets	Snowy Egret
Tri-colored Heron	Great Egret
Little Blue heron	Gt Blue Heron
Roseate Spoonbill	White Ibis
Yellow Legs	Cardinal
Red Winged Blackbird	Osprey
Pileated Woodpecker	Bald Eagle
Mangrove Cuckoo	Merlin
Northern Harrier	Willet
Black-crowned Night Heron	
Yellow-crowned Night Heron	

* Many of the facts and figures about Sanibel Island and the Darling National Wildlife Refuge in the first part of this article came from Sanibel Island, by Lynn Stone, Voyageur Press, 1991.

Marilyn graded her wonderful story in last month's Flyer only an A minus. I've changed them back in my computer, Marilyn, and you get and A+. — Bill Holcombe

DUES REMINDER

Sent in your 1997 dues yet? If not, mail a check to our treasurer, Charles Rend, at 109 John Bratton, Williamsburg, VA 23185. Rates are \$10.00 for a single membership, \$15.00 family, \$3 student and \$25 for a benefactor membership.

WHEN IT'S ITS

Marilyn Zeigler, being an English major and teacher has no trouble remembering when it's its, but this assistant editor was confused and changed Marilyn's correct possessive "its" to "it's."