



THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

Volume 21, Number 7

August 1997

AUGUST FIELD TRIP

Ruth Beck has graciously consented to lead another field trip to Craney Island. **It'll have be on the fourth Saturday of the month this time, August 23 to be exact, due to a scheduling conflict.** As usual, we'll gather in the parking lot to the right of the CW Visitor Center at 7:15 AM and leave there at 7:30.

Craney Island is a peninsula (not an island any more) that projects out into the James River, north of Portsmouth. The Army Corps of Engineers deposits dredgings taken from the harbor there and this makes it a surprisingly hospitable habitat for all sorts of water birds. Ruth conducts many of her research projects there and some of our members occasionally accompany her there to lend a hand. If you come you will see a wide variety of shore birds—bewildering to many who are not familiar with them. Never fear though, Ruth is just the person who can spot and help you identify them. Be sure to bring mosquito repellent, wear a hat (it's often very hot in the August sunlight and there's no shade), bring water and a bite to eat. We'll probably not get back here until 1:30 PM.

PRESIDENT'S CORNER

It is hard to believe the summer is almost over. Since I'm not one for really hot weather, I'll be glad to see it gone, except for the fact that it means back to work for me. The birding season is past its lowest ebb, so now is the time to brush off the binoculars and begin again. The shorebirds will be arriving soon and the frustration with identifying them will go up just in time for the fall warblers. While I was in Alaska I had some good

looks at several "peeps" in their breeding plumage and it still wasn't any easier. Of course, we are lucky because when they arrive here some will still be in breeding plumage, others in between and others in their new fall feathers. What a challenge!!

My trip to Alaska was wonderful but then any trip there is a delight in my book. It wasn't a birding trip and I had to keep reminding myself of that, but we did do a fair amount of looking. The instructor knew his northern birds very well. He was a botanist at heart and the course dealt with the geology and ecology of the northern regions. We talked a lot about ice, glaciers, permafrost and plants. When you see lots of moose, bear, caribou, marmot, fox and birds too you can't help but throw them into the lecture or discussion. Oh, and the musk oxen were the best mammals we saw.

My bird list consisted of 85 species and 26 life birds. It was great and if time allows, I will write a article for the newsletter about some of the places we visited and the highlights.

The club's first trip of the season is to Craney Island. It is always a good one with many good looks at shorebirds. The last few years the weather has cooperated and has been pretty and cool so maybe we will be lucky again. Take advantage of the opportunity to see these birds at fairly close range. With an excellent leader like Ruth you always come away with something new and interesting. — Lee

FIELD NOTES

Most of us think of July as perhaps the dulllest month of the year for birding. The birds are

quieter. They are fledging their young and then laboring through the molting process. The strangers moving through are few and far between. On top of that it's hot, buggy and muggy. Well, the undaunted trio of Joy Archer, Tom Armour and Bill Sheehan turned all of that into an interesting and challenging study of three of our favorite birding sites to make July-in-the-field a quite satisfying time.

At least one of the group, but usually more, visited each of these areas at least once a week and during the month. They identified a total of 90 species. The counts totaled 53 at JI, 59 at YR and 62 at HI. While this was going on Grace and Joe Doyle were making their regular schedule of birding visits to Camp Peary. They identified 80 species.

The area definitions and abbreviations on the table follow:

JI — Jamestown Is., Col. Parkway to Halfway Creek

YR — York River State Park incl. entrance road and Croaker Landing

HI — Hog Is. incl. Ferry and Chippokes

CP — Camp Peary

Bill Sheehan says that this listing shows the great diversity of the birding area that we are blessed with, even in a bad month. "We had a mix of residents, migratory breeders and shore birds. It reflects the foraging of shorebirds that nest east and west of us and the beginning of the shore bird migration which began around July 21."

First of all we'll list the 14 resident birds sighted in all four areas: Great Blue Heron, Bobwhite, Mourning Dove, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Northern Flicker, Blue Jay, American Crow, Eastern Bluebird, Mockingbird, Cardinal, Rufous-sided Towhee, Song Sparrow, House Finch and Goldfinch. Then there are the 14 migrant summer residents (and we include those borderline migrants sighted to some extent in all months) identified in all four areas: Laughing Gull, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Acadian Flycatcher, Eastern Kingbird, Purple Martin, Tree Swallow, Barn Swallow, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Indigo Bunting, Chipping Sparrow, Red-winged Blackbird, Common Grackle, Brown-headed Cowbird.

Here are the charted results of the others:

Species	JI	YR	HI	CP
Dbl. Crest. Cormorant	x		x	x
Great Egret			x	x
Tricolored Heron				x
Snowy Egret				x
Mute Swan	x			
Canada Goose	x		x	x
Wood Duck	x			x
Mallard			x	x
Turkey Vulture			x	x
Black Vulture			x	x
Bald Eagle	x		x	x
Red-shouldered Hawk				x
Red-tailed Hawk	x		x	x
American Kestrel			x	x
Wild Turkey		x		x
Clapper Rail				x
Semipalm. Plover			x	
Killdeer	x		x	x
Greater Yellowlegs			x	
Lesser Yellowlegs			x	
Spotted Sandpiper			x	
Semipalm. Sandpiper				x
White-rump. Sandpiper			x	
Ring-billed Gull			x	
Royal Tern			x	
Common Tern			x	x
Forster's Tern				x
Least Tern				
Chimney Swift		x	x	x
Belted Kingfisher		x	x	x
Red-headed Woodpecker	x	x		x
Downey Woodpecker	x	x		x
Hairy Woodpecker				x
Pileated Woodpecker	x			x
Wood Peewee	x	x		x
Phoebe		x	x	x

Great Crested Flycatcher	x	x		x
Rough-winged Swallow			x	
Fish Crow				x
Carolina Chickadee	x	x		x
Tufted Titmouse	x	x		x
White-breasted Nuthatch	x	x		x
Brown-headed Nuthatch				x
Marsh Wren	x			
Wood Thrush	x	x		x
Gray Catbird	x			x
Brown Thrasher	x		x	x
White-eyed Vireo	x	x		x
Yellow-throated Vireo		x		
Red-eyed Vireo	x	x		x
Northern Parula				x
Yellow-throated Warbler		x		x
Pine Warbler		x	x	
Prairie Warbler				x
Worm-eating Warbler			x	
Ovenbird		x		x
Louisiana Waterthrush		x		
Kentucky Warbler		x		
Common Yellowthroat	x	x	x	
Hooded Warbler		x		x
Yellow-breasted Chat				x
Summer Tanager	x	x		x
Scarlet Tanager	x	x		x
Blue Grosbeak			x	x
Field Sparrow		x	x	x
Eastern Meadowlark		x	x	x
Orchard Oriole			x	x

BIRD OF THE MONTH—WILSON'S PHALAROPE

by Bill Holcombe

Anticipating another wonderful day at Craney Island with Ruth Beck soon we'll take a look this month at the bird many of us thought was the highlight of last year's trip, Wilson's Phalarope. (And, incidentally, that trip had lots of highlights!)

Phalaropes, to me, were exotic, far away birds that I never expected to see unless I took trips to far away places. Then last August, *there it was in plain sight*, spinning in its funny circles in Hampton Roads, off Portsmouth, Virginia, with Norfolk in the background!

Reading about this bird in my brand new *Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds* (birthday gift from my loving Jane) it crossed my mind that more militant activists in the women's movement might well have adopted the Phalarope as their symbol. The female is larger and is more colorful than the male, selects the male partner (or, frequently, partners!), fights off other females who show interest in their mate, lets the male do most of the nest building and, after laying the eggs, leaves the incubating and fledging to the male and flies off to look after herself!

The Wilson's Phalarope is one of three in this family, the others being the Northern and Red Phalaropes. These other two breed in the far north and migrate in large flocks far out in the Atlantic or Pacific and are even rarer than the Wilson's on our shores.

The Wilson's latin name is *Phalaropus tricolor*, referring to its black, white and brown-red colors. It is the largest and most land-dwelling of the three and the only one limited to the New World. It summers on the northern great plains of U.S. and Canada near fresh water lakes and ponds. It winters in South America and the Falkland Islands. In breeding plumage the birds have brownish gray crowns, backs, tails and wings, also flecked with darker feathers. There is a white slash above the eye. A broad black streak runs through the eye and down the neck and turns to a cinnamon color splash at the shoulder. The chin, neck and breast are white and the neck is washed with a light cinnamon color. The bill has a long, black, needle-like shape and the legs are long and black with membranes extending from the sides of the toes. The fall migrating birds that we might see are much plainer with darkish gray color extending from the crown along the back and wings and white lower parts. There is a white streak above the eye. You first look for a pigeon sized black and white bird sitting buoyantly up in the water that has a characteristic habit of whirling in circles and pecking at the surface of the water with a

long, pointed black bill and a white line above a blacked eye.

Wilson's Phalaropes begin to leave the pampas and plains of South America in late March. They arrive on their U.S. and Canadian mid-continent nesting grounds in late April and early May. The females start aggressively chasing the males. When they have made a selection they defend him against other females. Both work on building the nest and the female deposits her eggs. Shortly afterwards she leaves the nesting area. Sometimes she'll select another male and lay a second set of eggs. The males incubate the eggs and tend to the brood. Each task takes about 18 days.

While more land-based than other Phalaropes, the Wilson's obtains most of its food by pecking along muddy shores like a Sandpiper, or by wading in shallow water, often with its head submerged. They are excellent swimmers and can also pick insect food off of the surface. They frequently spin in small circles while doing so. They have been observed following Shoveler Ducks, picking the insects and larvae off the surface they stir up.

The bulk of the migrants travel up and down the prairie belt, west of the Mississippi. In the fall some birds are observed on both coasts. May we be lucky enough to be among those observers on August 23!

A TRIP TO POINT PELEE

by Lee Schuster

It seems ages ago when Dave and I ventured to Point Pelee, yet it was only the middle of May when apparently all birders find their way there. We met a friend from Atlanta and tagged along with her group to experience one the most exciting birding escapades we have ever been on. There is nothing like warblers falling at your feet, so close that you don't need binoculars. You'll be looking at a beautiful Blackburnian Warbler and then someone will yell out "Chestnut-sided" and another person "Bay Breasted." The birds were everywhere and it was quite the learning experience.

The birds were behind schedule this year and according to park officials and people who had been there awhile, the big fallout had not occurred

yet. We just kept hoping it would happen while we were there, but to be honest, I couldn't see how it could get any better. Dave and I caught up with the group a day late. Before we arrived, the group had traveled from Detroit to Mio, Michigan in search of the Kirtland's Warbler. Unfortunately a brief snow storm arrived the same day (yes, this was May 15) and as hard as they tried, there were no Kirtland's to be found. So when they picked us up at the airport there were stories to tell about the cold and snow but none about the Kirtland's. From there we headed to our hotel and then to Point Pelee for our first introduction to warbler overload.

Point Pelee is Canada's smallest national park. It is a small strip of land that extends nine miles southward into Lake Erie. The habitats are varied and provide a perfect location for the birds flying across Erie to find shelter and food before they move on. In the fall they gather here to "stock up" before they head south across the lake to their wintering grounds. Approximately 346 bird species have been recorded in the Point Pelee area.

We arrived late in the afternoon or early evening to the Point. It was misty and cold but we took off behind the visitor center to see what we could find. We hadn't gone ten feet before we began seeing birds everywhere. The first warbler may have been a Nashville but then you would look somewhere else and there was a Yellow Warbler or a Veery or a Rose-breasted Grosbeak or more warblers—Blue-winged, Magnolia, Black-throated Blue, Yellow-rumped, Blackburnian, Black and White, Common Yellowthroat—the list goes on. And these weren't fleeting looks. The birds were right there and all of us were able to get excellent views. No one was getting "warbler neck" either.

Our first full day started at 6:00 AM, grabbing breakfast and heading to the Point. Besides all the birds, and we are talking a wide variety—warblers, orioles, tanagers, thrushes, flycatchers, wrens, vireos, grosbeaks, gulls, terns, ducks, and shorebirds—the number of people there was incredible too. We are accustomed to going places where birders are in the minority. But not here, everyone is birding or taking pictures. People look not at you, but your binoculars to see what kind you have. Amazing!!

We took a tram down to the tip which is the focal point of the bird activity. Not only do you get the gulls, terns, and shorebirds here on the beach, but hundreds of passerines are landing in the shrubs. Did you ever expect to see a Yellow Warbler on the beach? Seeing this number of people and so many the birds was truly "mind boggling." And the birds couldn't care less about the people. They just wanted rest and food. Most frustrating were the photographers who would walk right in front of you to get even a closer shot. But the birds did not care.

From the beach we slowly made our way back to the visitor center, exploring the road and woodland trails where all the birds in the park can be seen as they work their way inland. There are numerous places to bird away from the tip and we continued to find many colorful, feathered creatures. North of the visitor center are several picnic areas and trails such as DeLaurie Trail, Marsh Boardwalk, Tilden Wood Trail and a hiking/biking trail. There are numerous fresh water areas to look for the birds that like those habitats, such as Prothonotary Warblers, Northern Waterthrushes, ducks, herons and Solitary Sandpipers. There are many other places outside the park to bird as well, such as Hillman Marsh. We were there only two days so we spent most of our time in the park.

The visitor center posts the week's sitings, especially the most interesting birds. As the birding goes on and everyone has seen more than enough Yellow Warblers or Nashville Warblers (can that be?), people begin to seek out specific species and the real elusive birds such as the Golden-winged Warbler. We weren't that lucky but we did get one lifer that Dave and I had been waiting to see for many years. That bird was the Cape May Warbler. I think I stood there at least thirty minutes watching this beautiful little bird. It was only about ten feet away and I could have watched longer but had to move on.

Despite the weather (only one clear day), the group still managed about 130 species in three days. I had seven life birds, but more importantly, I had looks at birds that I will never forget. Our group stayed in Windsor, Ontario, but Leamington is much closer. The natives cater to birders and bend over backwards to accommodate. It is

necessary to make reservations well in advance (six months) or you will find yourself staying in Windsor, as we did, about an hour away. It is best to fly into Detroit and rent a car to get around. Point Pelee is a birding paradise and a great way to see the birds that pass through here later in the spring. I can't wait to go back.

WILD BIRDS UNLIMITED

The Bird Club has an ongoing agreement with Wild Birds Unlimited (1441 Richmond Road) whereby they make a donation to the Bird Club equivalent to five percent of their sales to club members. Members are reminded to **inform the sales clerk that they are Bird Club members** and to leave the sales receipt on file at the store.

We are pleased to report that we have recently received another donation from Wild Birds Unlimited in the amount of \$255.67. This was based on sales to our members from June 1996 to June 1997.

We will continue to fund our annual student research grant with this revenue. We thank Wild Birds Unlimited for their support and we encourage club members to patronize them for their birding supplies.

NEW MEMBERS

We extend a warm welcome to the following people who joined our club in the past few months:

Brian Bennett

Judith Bishop

Donald Collard

Virginia L. H. Davis

Joanne Finstrom

Barbara and John Raup

Stowell and Janice Symmes

Judy Thompson