



THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

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NEXT MEETING

The next meeting of the Williamsburg Bird Club will be on May 21, 1997, in Millington Hall, College of William & Mary. The meeting will convene at 7:30 PM. Dave Whalen, the William & Mary graduate student who received the Bird Club's 1996 research grant will be the speaker. His topic will be some recent studies he's been conducting on the Northern Saw-whet Owl.

MAY FIELD TRIP

Tom Armour will lead the bird walk to Hog Island on May 17. As usual, the group will gather at the parking lot to the right of the CW Visitor Center at 7:15 AM and leave at 7:30 sharp. If you're running late that morning, catch the group at the Jamestown ferry. It sails at eight o'clock.

APRIL FIELD TRIP

Julie Hotchkiss led a group of fifteen bird club members on a walk at York River State Park on April 9th. It was a cool and sunny day but it took perseverance on Julie's part for us to spot the number of species we did (45.) Highlights were: Double-crested Cormorant, Killdeer, Laughing Gull, Caspian and Common Terns, Belted Kingfisher, Eastern Phoebe, Barn Swallow, Carolina Chickadee, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Bluebird, White-eyed and Red-eyed Vireos, Northern Parula, Black-throated Green Warbler, Yellow-throated Warbler, Pine, Palm and Black & White Warblers, Common Yellowthroat, Rufous-sided Towhee, and Chipping, House and White-throated Sparrows.

Participating were Shirley Devan, Ann Moore, Tom Ellis, Chuck Rend, Marilyn Zeigler, Lee Schuster, John Eberhardt, Mike & Pat Healy, Anne & Phil Young, Randy & Jandy Strickland, and Richard Stanley.

PICNIC AT RUTH BECK'S

We will hold our annual picnic at Ruth and Sherwin Becks' house on Sunday, June 8 at 4:00 PM. This event substitutes for the regular June meeting.

The picnic begins with a bird walk in the woods around the Beck home. At about 6 o'clock the serious business of eating begins. Meat dishes and beverages will be provided for everyone. Everyone is asked to bring a vegetable, a salad or a dessert large enough to serve eight to ten people to round out the meal. Please sign up for the dish you'll bring at the May meeting. Otherwise, call Jeanne Armour (229-2363) to tell her what you intend to bring. Directions to the Beck's house will be passed out at the May meeting.

PRESIDENT'S CORNER

Oh those singing Warblers!! If you haven't noticed the increase in unusual songs lately, then step outside and listen. I have been to York River State Park every weekend and the difference week to week is amazing. Dave and I took our annual trek down to the Wildflower Pilgrimage in the Smokies a few weeks ago and had many good looks at warblers. It was cold that weekend and some migrants had not reached the Smokies yet or were being secretive. Most of the usual species were present but many of the birds we normally

see at higher elevations were not in view. We concluded the numbers of all birds were lower than in past years.

My real chance at warblers comes May 15 when we head off to Pt. Pelee. I can't wait to see the variety and numbers concentrated in that one place. Unfortunately we will miss the side trip for the Kirtland's Warbler but I guess you can't see everything. Maybe the conservation work aimed at increasing the Kirtland's numbers will give me a chance to see one at some time in our birding adventures.

I want to take this opportunity to wish everyone a wonderful summer. We do not meet during the summer months but there will be a newsletter published in June and July — none in August. I will not be at the May meeting due to my trip to New York for the Classroom Feeder Watch Project but look forward to seeing everyone at the annual picnic in June. — Lee

APRIL FIELD NOTES

By the end of April most of our winter residents were gone. There were only a few reports of Hermit Thrushes and one Ruby-crowned Kinglet in May. Lee Schuster may have seen the last of the Purple Finches on April 6. The large flocks of water fowl had left, leaving a scattering of ducks and the ever present resident geese, *but there were lots of migrating visitors*. The almost annual brief visit by the American White Pelican to Hog Island and the first Brown Pelican on the York River were reported. On April 2, Brian Taber saw the first Chimney Swift and the first Barn Swallow on College Creek and the Doyles saw the first Wood-pewee. Mrs. LeClaire, Queens Lake, reported the first Ruby-throated Hummingbird on April 9. Then the dam broke and migrants were all over the place: Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Acadian Flycatcher, Great-crested Flycatcher, Eastern Kingbird, Purple Martin, Wood Thrush, White and Red-eyed Vireos, Solitary Vireo, Yellow-throated Vireo, Summer Tanager, Scarlet Tanager, Blue Grosbeak and Indigo Bunting. And this long list of Warblers is added to the March report, Northern Parula, Yellow, Black-throated Green, Prairie, Black and White, Ovenbird, Kentucky and common Yellowthroat and Yellow Breasted Chat. Some of these birds

were so widely seen that they can only be described as “all over” — like Chimney Swifts, Pileated Woodpeckers, Phoebes, Great Crested Flycatchers, Eastern Kingbirds, Purple Martins, House Wrens, Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, Wood Thrushes, Catbirds, Brown Thrashers, Yellow-rumped Warblers, Common Yellowthroats and Chipping Sparrows.

Ruth Beck broke some sort of record by having a Rose-breasted Grosbeak, a Blue Grosbeak and an Indigo Bunting visit her feeder within a 15-minute period. The latter two were there together.

Jamestown Island, James River and Parkway
Common Loon, American White Pelican, Solitary Sandpiper, Spotted Sandpiper, Green-winged Teal, Blue-winged Teal, Wood Duck, Red-breasted Merganser, Black Vulture, Osprey, Bald Eagle, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Cooper's Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk, Northern Bobwhite, Hermit Thrush, White-eyed Vireo, Yellow-throated Vireo, Red-eyed Vireo, Northern Parula Warbler, Black-throated Green Warbler, Ovenbird, Summer Tanager, Caspian Tern, Royal Tern, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Kingfisher, Red-headed Woodpecker, Hairy Woodpecker, Brown-headed Nuthatch.

Hog Island and Ferry — Great Egret, Snowy Egret, Cattle Egret, Green-winged Teal, Blue-winged Teal, Black Vulture, Osprey, Bald Eagle, Northern Harrier, Red-tailed Hawk, Kestrel, Bonaparte's Gull, Great Black-backed Gull, Northern Bobwhite, Greater Yellowlegs, Lesser Yellowlegs, White-eyed Vireo, Yellow-throated Warbler, Prairie Warbler, Yellow-breasted Chat, Summer Tanager, Blue Grosbeak, Indigo Bunting, Caspian Tern, Royal Tern, Forster's Tern, Kingfisher, Rough-winged Swallow.

Chippokes — Wood Duck, Green-backed Heron, Black Vulture, Bald Eagle, Northern Harrier, Red-tailed Hawk, Kestrel, Turkey, Northern Bobwhite, Kingfisher, Red-headed Woodpecker, Acadian Flycatcher, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, White-eyed Vireo, Parula Warbler, Yellow-throated Warbler, Kentucky Warbler, Summer Tanager, Scarlet Tanager, Blue Grosbeak, Indigo Bunting, Orchard Oriole.

Kingsmill — Common Loon, Wood Duck, Blue-winged Teal, Red-shouldered Hawk, Coot, Spotted Sandpiper, Royal Tern, Common Tern,

Hermit Thrush, White-eyed and Red-eyed Vireos.

Kingswood — Red-shouldered Hawk, Hairy Woodpecker, Hermit Thrush, White-eyed Vireo, Solitary Vireo, Red-eyed Vireo, Prairie Warbler, Black and White Warbler.

York River State Park — Brown Pelican, Red-tailed Hawk, Kingfisher, Acadian Flycatcher, Solitary Vireo, Red-eyed Vireo, Yellow-throated Warbler, Palm Warbler, Black and White Warbler, Ovenbird.

Miscellaneous and Neighborhoods — At the **Hickory Signpost Bridge**, Wood Duck, Blue-winged Teal, Hairy Woodpecker, Parula Warbler, Yellow-throated Warbler, Louisiana Waterthrush; at the **Vineyards**, Common Loon, Red-shouldered Hawk, House Wren, and nearby on Airport Road, Yellow-breasted Chat. **Drummond Field** was revisited and had Greater Yellow Legs, Lesser Yellow Legs, and Solitary Sandpiper. Great Horned Owls were reported at **Jamestown Farms** and **Graylin Woods**, which also had Barred Owls. **Jolly Pond** had Parula Warbler and Turkey.

BIRD OF THE MONTH

The American White Pelican

by *Bill Holcombe*

While we don't usually give much space to rarely seen birds, this month is an exception with the American White Pelican. This is essentially for two reasons. The first is that one of these huge birds, with its wonderful "presence," shows up at Hog Island for a week or two stay most years. While some years it is in the April to May time frame, it has also been seen in October and November. It has shown up on two or three spring counts and in '96 one was seen on the Christmas bird count. The second reason is that I was fortunate enough to see this year's visitor during the spring count (May 11) and found it an awesome experience. When it soars into view it usually hangs around long enough to be seen by almost anyone who takes the time to look at one of the largest and most magnificent of North American birds. The White Pelican looks even more majestic than the Bald Eagle as it soars in slow circles over Hog Island.

Researching this bird turned up several surprises which I hope you will appreciate. After so many years of familiarity with the Brown Pelican I assumed that the White Pelican was also a sea bird. It is not. Rather, it nests on islands of inland lakes in Western North America from the Canadian Prairie Provinces down through Washington, Utah, Montana, the Dakotas, Nevada and northern California. The single largest nesting colony in North America is at Chase Lake National Wild Life Refuge in North Dakota, where as many as 8,000 breeding pairs have been counted. It is almost totally migratory and winters south from central California into Mexico and around the Gulf to Louisiana and Florida. Hog Island is apparently not the only "resort" on it's visitation plan. It has been reported in every eastern state except New Hampshire and Vermont.

At a distance this is an all-white bird with black trailing edges on the wings similar to a Gannet. The huge orange or salmon colored bill is very prominent. During late winter courtship until after the eggs are laid, large vertical, horny plates extend along the top of the bill. (This ridge was plainly visible on our May 11 visitor.) Viewed up close, the bare skin around the bill is blue-gray, eyes are orange-yellow, legs and feet are orange-red. Both sexes are similar. In the spring and early summer a yellowish fringe appears on the nape of the neck and there's a patch of it on the breast too. Normal weight is around 17 pounds but there are records up to 30 pounds. Wings spans can reach 9-1/2 feet. That is two feet longer than its cousin, the Brown Pelican, and our largest nearby bird, the Bald Eagle. Banded birds have been found as old as 17 years. A captive bird in the Washington National Zoo lived past 34 years.

White Pelicans build rather sloppy nests in large colonies on islands in fresh water lakes or slow moving rivers. They normally lay two eggs, share incubation and have their young flying in about thirty days. They nest close to one another. Eggs frequently roll out of a crude nest only to be scooped up by a neighboring pair, so that that egg clutches range from one to five. Then Darwin's "survival of the fittest" takes over. The nesting pairs rarely raise more than one youngster, as the largest and most aggressive one gets most of the food from the parent's bill-pouch. Often this does-in its nest mate. After about 25 days the

young leave the nests and form pods of five or six. These gradually merge into one containing all the colony's young by about age 50 days. Mutual recognition between parents and young seems instantaneous.

These birds do not make the bone jarring, kamikaze dives of their brown cousins when feeding. They form cooperatives in a crescent shaped line and drive the fish into shallow water. There they scoop them up in the famous pouch that truly and scientifically "holds more than their bellican." They also forage individually in shallow water along shorelines. They eat suckers, catfish, carp, shiners and some salamanders and crayfish. They squeeze the water out of the corners of the mouth before storing the catch in the throat. In some western states they eat a lot of trout.

That big pouch plays a role in courtship and mating displays. These pelicans inflate the pouch and bow to one another with a peculiarity that the female bows lower than the male. (Shades of the "King and I"). This bowing with the inflated pouch continues after nesting starts and is used frequently when the birds exchange incubating duties. There is no evidence that pairing lasts beyond one season and the courtship behavior, as in migrating ducks, seems to start in the winter shortly after arrival at the cold weather quarters.

UPDATE ON YORK RIVER STATE PARK MIGRATION WALKS

by Lee Schuster

Since April 1st I have been visiting York River State Park and really enjoying the variety of birds that have also been there. I got out of my car the first morning I was there and immediately had a good look at a White-eyed Vireo. Things only got better from then on. The only drawback is in not sharing the experiences with any of our bird Club members. Dave helped one weekend, the club bird walk was another, and Jandy and Randy Strickland gave me a hand one day. This should be a club activity and I am disappointed no one else is sharing in the great birds we have been seeing. For example, this past Sunday (May 4) within five minutes of arrival saw a Prairie Warbler, Yellow Warbler, Orchard Oriole (male and female). Then the Stricklands arrived and our day got even

better. We saw a Blue Grosbeak, Indigo Bunting and a Summer Tanager. Then we hit the woods and warblers really began to appear.

The last weekend in May will probably be my last trip for the spring. Birding has been so good there lately I don't want to miss a weekend. Hopefully these walks will begin again in early September.

Some highlights of my visits are listed below:

- * 18 species of warblers
- * Orchard Orioles two weekends in a row
- * Nesting Ospreys
- * Indigo Buntings and Blue Grosbeaks - good comparison
- * Blue-gray Gnatcatchers by the dozens
- * Variety of bird songs all sung at one time and determining who is there.

CLASSROOM FEEDERWATCH UPDATE

by Lee Schuster

Thanks to the generous donation by the bird club as well as other sources, the first year of Classroom Feeder watch at Toano Middle School was a success. The students have finished their final reports analyzing the data we recorded during December, January and February. They analyzed the data from various aspects such as the effects of temperature, time of day, and precipitation on the number and species of birds that visited our feeders. Some students looked at the numbers of certain bird species that visited the feeders. It was a great learning experience for the students and for me. I look forward to continuing the project next year, especially since some of the kinks have been worked out.

I'm not sure why I was chosen, but I was invited to visit Cornell's Ornithology Lab this month and to serve on the advisory committee for next year's field test. This year approximately sixty schools across the country participated. Next year they hope to increase that to 150. Please consider joining me next year if you have spare time during the day and an interest in getting middle school kids hooked on birds. I would certainly welcome you and your expertise and would love to have another adult work with the students.

Oh, and thanks again for the club's donation.

20TH ANNUAL SPRING COUNT

Clear skies and warm winds were on hand May 11 for this landmark count. Thanks to the dedicated corps of volunteers, which included Joy Archer, Tom Armour, Hugh Beard, Christine Burr, Joe & Grace Doyle, Gary Driscoll, Betteye Fields, Adrienne Frank, Ron & Bobbie Geise, Bill Holcombe, Carol & Paul McAllister, Mary Pulley, Dave & Lee Schuster, Emily Sharrett, Cheryl Shelburne, Dot Silby, Jandy & Randy Strickland, Brian Taber, Bill Williams and Marilyn Zeigler.

Among the highlights of the 155 species sighted were an adult Mississippi Kite, a very rare bird in Virginia and a first local sighting, an endangered Piping Plover for a fifth local sighting, an American White Pelican, which makes occasional visits to Hog Island, a Philadelphia Vireo, Black Terns in striking breeding plumage, two Cliff Swallows, seven late-leaving Ruddy Ducks, an equally tardy Red-breasted Merganser, 17 Wild Turkeys, 22 species of Warblers and 13 species of shorebirds.

Bill Sheehan's records indicate the total is about average. While he did not have time to do a complete analysis, due to *The Flyer* deadline, he did note that for the first time ever no Whip-poor-wills were seen. Final count in the next *Flyer*.

ADVENTURES ON THE BLUEBIRD TRAIL

For several years the Bird Club has maintained a trail of Bluebird houses on the grounds of Eastern State Hospital. Elaine Mertus has looked after them for the past three years. She is currently assisted by Shirley Devan and Sondra Rodgers. The team has dealt with some unusual events in recent weeks.

A few weeks ago twelve of the 15 boxes were occupied by nesting pairs. English Sparrows were harassing one pair. One baby had been killed and two others were injured. Elaine found one box with three babies the same age, so after stuffing meal worms down their throats, they transferred the two pecked birds to that nest and destroyed the old nest. Next week's check showed the five babies all doing well and the Sparrow's nest in the old Bluebird box was empty. Elaine says they will keep doing that until the Sparrows move on.

Otherwise they will lose that box for Bluebirds.

However, tragedy struck later when a King Snake found the box with the transferred babies and all were lost. "It is never pleasant to lose birds to a snake, but after all, that is natural activity," Elaine said philosophically, "but I really get angry at the sparrow predation." This is a man-made problem and I have no compunction against destroying sparrows that are threatening Bluebirds." In her three years this was the first loss to a snake. The support poles are coated with axle grease to fend off racoons and that probably works against snakes too, but this snake probably dropped in from an over-hanging branch.

Over the past three years the trail has produced about seventy fledgling per year. The club can be proud of this result.

Sondra Rogers, who is a newcomer to this activity had an adventure of her own growing out of the activity. A neighbor who had an occupied box asked her to get a fix on what was inside. This box, unfortunately, was the bottom-loading kind and when they opened the bottom to see the birds three of them burst forth and fluttered into the bushes. Forest Fenstermacher, another club member lives close by. His wife, Ruth, and Sondra managed to get two back into the box. An hour or so later the missing baby was found flopping about in the grass under the box and the family was one again reunited. Sondra says if you intend to investigate the contents of your own Bluebird box, make sure it's a top or side opening box before opening.

Incidentally, those of you who have enjoyed birding with Elaine Mertus will be happy to know that her husband has secured a promising new position. Sad for us though, it is in Corning, N.Y. They leave August first.

NEW MEMBERS

Please welcome John & Jean Bruce, 248 William Barksdale, Williamsburg, as new members.