



THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

Volume 21, Number 9

October 1997

NEXT MEETING

Our next meeting will be on Wednesday, October 15th in room 106 Millington Hall on the William & Mary campus, beginning at 7:30 PM. Bill Portlock will address the group on "Birds and the Natural History Rappahannock River Valley."

OCTOBER FIELD TRIP

Tom Armour will lead a fall field trip to York River State Park on Saturday, October 18. As usual, we'll gather in the C.W. Visitor Center Parking lot (right side of the building as you enter) at 7:15 AM and depart there at 7:30.

PRESIDENT'S CORNER

It was good to see everyone who attended September's meeting. We had a nice turnout of members, new and old, and visitors we hope will become members. Fall has definitely arrived and birds are passing through.

This week at school an American Redstart—young male or a female—tried to enter the building but fortunately didn't get through. Imagine being a five-inch bird and having hundreds of middle schoolers standing around you. Luckily there was enough "kind" interest and someone gently picked it up and brought it to me. Besides the fact it was shocked by the noise and middle schoolers in general, I checked it over and then released it away from the school and students. I must say it was beautiful and peaked many interests.

As this month continues, keep carefully checking your yards and anywhere you bird for migrants passing through. At our house we had a Parula Warbler bathing in our sprinkler and having a

good time with a Titmouse. Be observant because they are there once and then suddenly gone. Don't forget to report any sighting to Bill Sheehan so they can go in the newsletter.

Have a good month and I hope to see everyone at the next meeting. Happy Birding, Lee

NEW PROJECT

Would you like to help broaden our Field Note coverage?

In last month's *Flyer* we showed a comparison of four popular birding areas that were visited at least once a week for a month. The results were interesting enough to make some people wonder if we could expand that concept. Would YOU be willing, for example, to visit a particular birding area three or four times each month and then mail a check-off report to Bill Sheehan? It would be of value if you only made one visit in the month but a couple would be better. In this regard it might be more interesting and would yield more meaningful data if you had a partner, so two could enjoy the birding together. When one person is not available the other can keep the report going.

Here is a list of areas (and you may want to use some other favorite of your own): Some areas are covered regularly now but adding to the coverage doesn't hurt a thing—unless, of course, everyone wants to cover Hog Island/Chippokes.

The Ferry, Chippokes, Hog Island Complex

2. Jamestown Island
3. York River State Park
4. College Woods
5. Jolly Pond
6. The New High School Nature Trail
7. Hickory Sign Post Bridge

8. Kingsmill
9. Camp Peary
10. The Vineyards
11. Governor's Land
12. Ford's Colony
13. College Landing Park
14. Basset Hall Woods
15. Country Road between Colonial Williamsburg and Carter's Grove
16. York River along the Parkway

Some of these areas go dormant during certain seasons so common sense needs to be applied. For example, the Parkway along the York River is prime territory for migrant waterfowl during the fall, winter and early spring but may not deserve a lot of late spring and summer patrolling. On the other hand, if no one has done that regularly, how do we know what's been there?

If you'll look at the Field Notes in past issues of *The Flyer*, you will see that certain areas are reported on every month. A hard core of seven or eight members make those reports regularly. They are augmented by the rest of us occasionally when we see something of interest. If the Field Notes contain several more reports from specific, productive terrain by 15-20 regular reporters, we think that those regular reporters will enjoy their increased involvement, the club will get a more illuminating report and we, as a group, might notice more interesting strangers passing through.

If you would like to participate in this effort please give your name and address and chosen area of coverage at a regular meeting to Lee Schuster or mail the information to Bill Holcombe, 4705 Ladyslipper Path, Williamsburg, VA 23188. We will supply forms for reporting. Bill Sheehan would rather receive this information in written form so he doesn't have to juggle notebook and papers while talking on the phone. If you have questions, call Lee at 565-6148 or Bill Holcombe at 229-8057.

SEPTEMBER FIELD TRIP

Fourteen members joined in a field trip led by Julie Hotchkiss to Kiptopeke State Park on September 20, 1997. The group saw 36 bird species—not a record but a goodly number considering rather

non-ideal conditions for making record counts. Generally a cool north wind is best for bringing in good numbers of migrants there, but this was a warm, still day. One bird that was in abundant evidence was the Merlin.

Those who visited the warbler nets saw a Red-eyed Vireo and an American Redstart. They also saw a Magnolia Warbler caught and released.

Members making the trip included Anne Young, Marc & Pam Meiring, Rand & Jandy Strickland, Bob & Joan Brown, Bob Fritts, Marilyn Zeigler and Julie Hotchkiss.

NEW MEMBERS

Welcome to these two new members who joined The Williamsburg Bird Club in September.

Barbara E. Hitt
5815 Williamsburg Landing Road
Williamsburg, VA 23185

Jerry & Mary Ann Field
221 Sir Thomas Lunsford Dr.
Williamsburg, VA 23185

FIELD NOTES

Last month's *Flyer* suggested we be on the lookout in September for the arrival of twelve species of ducks and mergansers. Interesting that not a one of them was spotted. Perhaps the unusually warm weather of late has delayed their return from the north. We did see several other kinds of migrating ducks, most notably Green and Blue-winged Teals and the American Widgeon.

Hog Island was quite productive. A past president, John Hertz, and wife Eleanor saw a Marbled Godwit there. Also seen were Snowy Egret, Sora, Green-backed Heron, Caspian and Royal Terns, Snipe, and Semipalmated and Least Sandpipers.

The warblers are coming through. So far the most notable among them have been the Northern Parula, Pine, Palm, Black & White Warblers and American Redstart.

Randy & April Coleman found a young Screech Owl in a bird box on their property at the Vineyards. Elsewhere, Great Horned and Barred Owls were reported.

HOG ISLAND HUNTING SEASON

The *wild duck* hunting season at Hog Island runs from October 8, 1997 through January 20, 1998. During that period the refuge is essentially closed to birders on *Wednesdays* and *Saturdays*. The *deer hunting season* for archers is now through November 15th. Birding will be allowed but with certain areas closed to non-hunters.

The above information is the best we have as we go to press. To avoid any unpleasant surprises, call Mark Walls or Tony Castillo at Hog Island (757-357-5224) before trekking over there to look for birds.

BIRD OF THE MONTH

by Bill Holcombe

Nuthatches: White-breasted, Red-breasted and Brown Headed

(*The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds is the reference.*)

As we pass from the time of the summer migrants to the winter visitors, this seems to be a good time to take a look at the Nuthatches. One is a winter visitor, the Red-breasted Nuthatch. One is a constant, year 'round resident of our seed feeders, the White-breasted Nuthatch. The other is a year 'round resident, limited pretty much to Hog Island and, occasionally, Jamestown Island. He's the Brown-headed Nuthatch. There is a fourth North American Nuthatch, the Pygmy Nuthatch, but as this bird stays west of the Rocky Mountains we'll have no more to say about him.

Our three Nuthatches are all well known for their unique ability to feed coming down the tree trunk head first while searching for insects and larvae in the bark. All feed on tree-trunk insects when available and adapt readily to a diet of nuts and seeds as the need and opportunity arise. (A remarkable discovery reported by Morse in 1968 is that the Brown-headed actually uses a piece of bark clamped in its bill as a tool to pry off other pieces of bark that are covering insect food!) All are quite verbal while feeding and flying from tree to tree. All tend to feed in groups as they work their way up and down stands of tree trunks and

all are frequently accompanied by Titmice, Downy Woodpeckers, Chickadees and sometimes Brown Creepers and Pine Warblers. All will either use woodpecker holes or work together to dig out a nesting cavity 15 to 50 feet up in a tree or post and then line the hole with soft bark, animal hair or fur and soft grass. (White Breasteds have been known to pull hairs from squirrels tails!) All will nest in bird boxes and both sexes share nest building, incubating and feeding duties. Most are not migratory but in years of food shortages there can be great irruptions of red-breasted birds moving southward. Reports from birders in southern Pennsylvania indicated just such a move in the winter of '96. Locally, in the winter there are always at least some scattered reports of red-breasted birds in our area. And here is a really interesting thought: the Audubon Encyclopedia also reports that all will readily take seeds from your hand! I intend to try this soon.

Now for the differences. While all are basically small birds with prominent pointed bills and with blue-gray backs and white bellies, the heads differ. The Brown-headed has a buffy brown cap and nape with a white spot in the nape where it meets the blue-gray back. The Red-breasted has a white stripe above the eye, a black stripe running through the eye and a buffy red-brown wash on the throat and belly. It is clearly the most handsome of the three. When we see this bird here in the winter, the reddish-brown wash on the throat and belly can be faint to non-existent and the white slash above the black eye slash is the dominant mark. Sexes are all alike except that the Red-breasted female has a bluish-black cap. Wing spans range from 7 to 11 inches, the Brown-headed the smallest and the White-breasted the largest. Banding records show ages ranging from 4 ½ years for the Brown-headed to almost ten years for the White-breasted.

The Red-breasted Nuthatch lives in the most northern area and its Latin name, *sitta canadensis*, is indicative of its Canadian range which extends also across the northern portion of the United States. *Sitta carolinensis*, Latin for the White-breasted Nuthatch, indicates a more southerly range but in fact its range is from mid-Canada south through the eastern half of the U.S. to the Gulf. The Brown-headed ranges north from the Gulf to coastal Delaware and southern Missouri.

Locally the White-breasted Nuthatch is just all over and if you have a seed feeder, this bird is on it. The Brown-headed Nuthatch is commonly found on Hog Island by going to the river and then following the trail south to the tall trees. Less often it is seen on Jamestown Island. It is harder to localize the Red-breasted Nuthatch which Club records show as sighted from September 13 to June 3 with wide variations year to year. Bill Sheehan had one in his backyard for several winters. When it disappeared, one showed up at Brian Taber's feeder. They were frequently at Juel Duke's feeder in the winter of '95 and nary a report last year. If you see one, please report it to Bill Sheehan.

Interesting miscellany: A study of the White-breasted Nuthatch shows pairs staying together in a limited feeding area of 15-20 acres for the entire year, staying within calling distance even when feeding separately. In very cold weather, white-breasteds have been known to form closely packed groups in tree hollows to keep warm. It is very rare for any of the nuthatches to be victimized by Cowbirds. White-breasted chicks first fly 14 days after hatching; the others take 18 days. The Latin family name *sitta* was used by Aristotle for a bird that pecks at the bark of trees. The name Nuthatch is a corruption of Nuthack as these European species were seen to hack open nuts. There are 18 European species. Nuthatches are closely related to Titmice and are frequently seen in the company of these "cousins".

number of birds in the group, plus your name and phone number.

NECK COLLARS ON CANADA GEESE

If you should observe any Canada Geese wearing neck collars, the Virginia Department of game and Fisheries would like to know where and in what numbers. This is in connection with their population studies. The collars may be white or some other light color and usually have a visible three-letter code printed on the collar. If the birds are fairly close and are on the ground, the letters can usually be read using binoculars.

If you see any, please provide the following information to Bill Sheehan (220-2122), who will consolidate the data and pass it on to State Game biologists: location, collar color, code (if visible),