



THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

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NEXT MEETING

It won't be until January, and instead of the usual December field trip we will have the Audubon Christmas Count on Sunday, December 21. Call Bill Holcombe at 229-8057 if you would like to join in the bird count. He'll place you unless you have a particular place you would like to work.

PRESIDENT'S CORNER

Let me begin by saying how much I have enjoyed serving as the president of the Williamsburg Bird Club. I have had the opportunity to meet many interesting people as well as enjoy the company and new friendships with many of our members. Our club is special because we have a wonderful membership which includes talented people who go above and beyond the call to duty to help others learn about and enjoy the birds in our area. I have enjoyed working with you and I especially want to thank the other board members for their service and dedication to the club.

As the holidays approach, we become wrapped up in the everyday hustle and bustle of the season and forget about the beauty that surrounds us. This cold weather is ushering in winter bird species that draws us to our feeders or the desire to brave the wind and cold and wander around some of the many parks and natural areas to see the visiting avian species. Visions of Evening Grosbeaks, Purple Finches, Pine Siskins, Redpolls and others will not only dance in your heads but may become reality. Cornell University is doing a winter finch survey due to the number of species that have apparently been wandering out of their normal range in higher numbers. If you are interested in reporting any winter finch numbers please contact them at:

<http://www.acnatsci.org/bnabirds.cornell.edu/winf/in/wifin.htm>. If this does not work call me and I will try to provide another contact.

I hope everyone has a wonderful holiday season and that the coming year is one of good health, happiness and excellent birds. Take care and I look forward to seeing you at the Christmas Bird Count on December 21 and at our next meeting.

— Lee Schuster

1997 GRANT RECIPIENTS

Each year the Bird Club provides a \$500 grant to a student for ornithological research. This year the selection committee thought there were two outstanding applicants and awarded \$300 to each of them. Valerie Weiss will study "Population declines and habitat requirements for the Brown-headed Nuthatch." Chris Gordon seeks to answer the question: "Is food acquisition a limiting factor in the reproductive success of the Black Skimmer?" We congratulate these two grant recipients.

FIELD NOTES

Early sightings of **Red-breasted Nuthatches** and an **Evening Grosbeak** give their admirers hope for a season of frequent sightings of these very handsome cold weather migrants. Tom McCary had a couple of the nuthatches at his feeder on Richmond Road, Marilyn Zeigler also spotted them at her feeder in Queen's Lake and Bill Sheehan heard and saw six grosbeaks flying over his back yard. (We heard that Ruth Beck had seen **Evening Grosbeaks** out in Barhamsville but couldn't reach her to get details.) The nuthatches stayed around for a couple of days. From Kingsmill Tom Armour reported the fall's first **Purple Finch**. Joe Doyle spotted the fall's first **Coot** at

Camp Peary. **Red-breasted Mergansers, Hooded Mergansers, American Widgeon, Pintails and Blue-winged Teal** were reported by everyone looking at the rivers and Hog Island impoundments. There were also notable summer migrants still hanging around: Lee Schuster had a **Yellow-billed Cuckoo** and an **Ovenbird** at Banberry Cross and both **Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs** were seen at Hog Island and Camp Peary. For birders active in the field, November was a pretty good month.

Jamestown Island: Pied-billed Grebe, Great Egret, Mute Swan, Wood Duck, Green-winged Teal, Hooded Merganser, Osprey, Bald Eagle, Red-shouldered Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk, Clapper Rail, Kildeer, Great Horned Owl, Red-headed Woodpecker, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Hermit Thrush, Brown Thrasher, Pine Warbler, Swamp Sparrow.

James River: Horned Grebe, Brown Pelican, Bufflehead, Red-breasted Merganser, Bald Eagle, Bonaparte's Gull, Great Black-backed Gull, Forster's Tern.

Hog Island: Pied-billed Grebe, Great Egret, Tundra Swan, Green-winged Teal, Pintail, Blue-winged Teal, Gadwall, American Widgeon, Hooded Merganser, Ruddy Duck, Wood Duck, Red-tailed Hawk, Kestrel, Kildeer, Greater & Lesser Yellowlegs, Dunlin, Tree Swallow, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Pine Warbler.

York River: Common Loon, Horned Grebe, American Widgeon, Bufflehead, Hooded Merganser, Ruddy Duck, Bald Eagle, Brown Pelican, Bonaparte's Gull, Great Black-backed Gull. (As this newsletter is being written, Loons can be seen swimming just off the fishing pier at Yorktown Beach.)

Camp Peary: Pied-billed Grebe*, Great Egret, Tundra Swan**, Mute Swan, Wood Duck, Green-winged Teal***, Blue-winged Teal****, Gadwall, American Widgeon*, Canvasback****, Ring-necked Duck**, Ruddy Duck, Bufflehead, Hooded Merganser**, Bald Eagle, Kestrel, Wild Turkey, Northern Bobwhite, Clapper Rail, Coot, Kildeer, Greater & Lesser Yellowlegs, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Red-headed Woodpecker, Tree Swallow, Ruby-crowned Kinglet*, Pine Warbler, Meadowlark. *First fall sightings at Camp Peary:*

*11/2, **11/9, ***11/16, ****11/23

Kingsmill: Pied-billed Grebe, Forster's Tern, Ring-necked Duck, Red-shouldered Hawk, PURPLE Finch (first fall report), Golden and Ruby-crowned Kinglets.

Kingswood: Brown Thrasher, Golden and Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Hermit Thrush, Brown Thrasher, FOX SPARROW, EVENING GROS-BEAK (first fall reports), Red-shouldered Hawk.

The question sometimes comes up about the birds that are *not* reported in these monthly listings.

There is obviously some duplication of sightings between areas now. However, if we included all the crows, bluejays, starlings, mourning doves, etc., wading through these notes might daunt the most enthusiastic of birders. The object is to provide our members with the names of interesting birds they may find by visiting the areas that are reported. So a distinction is made between what was seen and what was reported, eliminating the common, permanent residents, and some very common migrants in a few cases. Yellow-rumped Warblers, for example, are not generally reported. Red-headed Woodpeckers are reported but Red-bellied and the rest of the resident woodpeckers are not. Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, which migrate here in winter, are reported. Black Vultures, which are much less common than the Turkey Vultures seen constantly overhead, are reported but their cousins are not. Officially, our members reported 89 species to Bill Sheehan in November but we only reported 55 of them in *The Flyer*. If you have thoughts on this, please pass them along, as we get very little feedback to judge how our efforts are received.

Contributors to November's report include Joy Archer, Tom Armour, Grace & Joe Doyle, Bill Holcombe, Dave & Lee Schuster, Bill Sheehan, Bill Snyder, Brian Taber and Marilyn Zeigler.

ADDING TO OUR FIELD NOTES COVERAGE

So far, five members have volunteered to participate in this experiment to widen the area regularly covered by the monthly field notes reported in *The Flyer*. The hope is that we will add to the sightings now reported and open up some areas that may be productive and new to our members.

This new coverage will have Tom McCary at the Lake Matoka running path; Charlie Drubel at Queen's Lake, Marilyn Zeigler at the nature trail in back of Bassett Hall; Bill Williams at the nature trail behind the new high school and running by the beaver pond; Bill Holcombe at the area surrounding the airport off Lake Powell Road. It is intended that the coverage will include at least two or three trips a month. It may turn out that winter coverage is not very productive but spring though the fall is. In any event we hope to learn something and add to the information which we have collected regularly over 25 years.

Would you like to take part? No one reports regularly from Ford's Colony, nor from Governor's Land, but we pick up many birds in those places on the Christmas and spring bird counts. Waller Mill Park might be productive. Or, you may have an area that you would like to add. If you are interested, call Bill Holcombe at 229-8057 or speak to Joy Archer or Bill at a meeting.

NEW MEMBER

Kathleen Kollman of Williamsburg joined the Club in November. Welcome!

IMPROVEMENTS AT HOG ISLAND

With help from Ducks Unlimited, the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries recently completed three water control installations at the Hog Island Wildlife Management Area. This will permit the area's caretakers, wildlife biologist Mac Wells, and wildlife caretaker, Tony Castillo, to manage an additional hundred acres of impoundment. The project also will restore management water level capabilities to another thirty acres of impoundment. The completion of nearly five miles of ditches will allow for improved moist soil management on 600 acres of wetlands. All of the waterfowl and shore birds that inhabit Hog Island will benefit from these improvements.
(Excerpted from *Ducks Unlimited*, Nov./Dec. 97)

FIELD TRIP REPORTS

October: The soggy morning of Saturday October

18 was an inauspicious one for birders looking forward to the Bird Club trip to York River State Park. Nevertheless, Mike and Alex Minarik, Hugh Beard, Karen Little, Lee Schuster and Joy Archer decided to proceed in the "heavy mist." As they waited for the park gate to open they watched two Bald Eagles tangling in the sky and a sharpshin pursuing a red-tail. This display was followed by views of osprey, kingfisher, wood duck, cormorant, four woodpeckers, including a pileated, and yellow-rump and black & white warblers.

Following the beautiful, redesigned Taskinas Creek trail around the marsh edge, they found winter wrens, rails, swamp and white-throated sparrows and a ruby-crowned kinglet. Total birds for the surprising, delightful morning: 28.

November: It had rained the night before but the sun came out just as our adventurers drove down the parkway towards the York River and Yorktown Beach destinations. It was a beautiful day to see modest numbers of a very respectable group of birds, including: Common Loon, Pied-billed and Horned Grebes, Tundra Swan, Black Duck, American Widgeon, Bufflehead, Hooded Merganser, Ruddy Duck, Turkey, Kildeer, Great Black-backed Gull, Forster's Tern, Belted Kingfisher and Hairy Woodpecker. Tom Armour led the troops on this field trip. Other marchers were Alex Minarik, Joy Archer, Chuck Rend, Sean Higgins, Dana Hanley, Ashley Donley, Marilyn Zeigler, Tom McCary, Lee Schuster and Hugh Beard.

BIRD OF THE MONTH

The American Coot

As these birds arrived back in our region just recently and have with some interesting features, let's talk about them.

My first surprise was that while they may behave like ducks, look something like ducks and keep the company of ducks, these birds are totally unrelated — they're members of the Rail family! We see them here when they come south from their nesting grounds which range from southern Canada through the northern tiers of the United States. And this is a bird without any complex identification problems. When you see a small, round, plump, dark slate-colored bird behaving

like a pond duck and it has a short, stark white bill, it is a Coot and there isn't anything else "almost like it." In our area Coot tend to cluster in pods of six to fifteen as they paddle about in fresh water ponds at Hog Island or along our rivers, or even on Lake Powell or Lake Matoka. Elsewhere they can winter over in very large flocks. They can tip up for bottom feeding in shallow water like a Mallard or they can dive from the surface to depths of twenty feet like a Bufflehead or Ringneck. Their rather greenish feet have lobed toes so they are powerful swimmers. They are powerful flyers too, although they have to run across the water with big splashy steps to get airborne. Sexes look alike and both have red eyes. Juveniles are lighter gray with brown eyes and grey bills. They have been sighted here as early as August 14 and as late as May 21.

Coot start their northern migration as early as March and some years suffer terrible losses when temperatures drop and the water refreezes. Pairs go through courtship displays on the water and utter loud cackles, whistles, croaks, grunts and babbling sounds with much splashing of water. This goes on both day and night. It may be the source of the "crazy as a coot" epithet. Nests are built by both birds and actually float on the surface, tied securely to reeds and well concealed among bull rushes and cattails. Eight to twelve eggs are laid and they are incubated by both birds. Chicks hatch in 24 days and can fly in about fifty. They can swim well as soon as they dry out after

hatching.

Coot eat aquatic plants, small fish, tadpoles, snails, worms and aquatic insects; sometimes feed on meadows and fields of grain far from their home marshland. One bird at the Washington National Zoo lived to be eleven years and five months. Banded wild birds have been identified as old as 9-1/2 years.

While not as common as some of our wintering waterfowl, these birds are not hard to find if you set out to do so. Hog Island is probably the most dependable place to look for them although they can be seen at all the places mentioned above. The reference for this article was *The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds*, by John Terres. — by Bill Holcombe

HOW BIG IS THE BIRDING BUSINESS?

In the state of Virginia alone over 1.8 million birders were watching and feeding birds and spending \$108.3 million for seeds, nesting boxes and bird baths. This generated state sales tax revenue in the amount of \$5.1 million. Not included in these figures is travel, overnight lodging cost and food. Nationwide there were over 63 million birders who spent more than \$3.3 billion in retail sales and more than \$306 million in sales tax. (From *VSO Newsletter*, July 1997)

