



THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Happy New Year, everyone!

I am pleased to have the opportunity to serve as Bird Club President for this year. Certainly I have some wonderful role models. Since I've been a member Bill Williams, Ruth Beck, Thom Blair, John Hertz, Bill Snyder, Dick Mahone, Tom Armour and, of course most recently Lee Schuster have set a high standard. The club is well organized, fiscally sound, contributes to habitat preservation and ornithological research, and is structured to provide interesting experiences for its members. I hope to perpetuate this legacy.

Plans for the new year include some speakers with extraordinary expertise coralled for us by Vice President Hugh Beard, and some field trips to far and near spots under the guidance of Trip Coordinator Ron Geise. Bill Holcombe of the now-famous "Holcomb's List" will tell us at the January meeting the rules of the game for '98. Continuing our new tradition of refreshments after meetings Marilyn Zeigler has volunteered to supply same through the spring. I hope people will offer to help her provide this pleasant socializing time. Bill Davies also appreciates volunteers for his very successful clean highway project on Route 5.

As always, the Board and I welcome your ideas and suggestions for any aspect of the club's operation. Thank you for the chance to give something back to this club which has been so helpful to me over the years in my effort to become a birder. I will be reporting to you on a quarterly basis; in the meantime keep me posted and have very happy birding. — Joy Archer

DUES TIME

With the arrival of the new year it's time to remind everyone to pay his or her annual dues. They are the same as last year: \$10.00 for individuals; \$15 for families, \$25 for patron membership and \$3 for students. In 1997 we had a significant increase in **Patron Membership** — 25 compared to eight in 1996. We thank these members for their generosity and invite others to consider patron membership. Please mail your renewal in the enclosed envelope or give your check to Charles Rend, our Treasurer, at the January meeting.

NEXT MEETING

Our next meeting will be on Wednesday, January 22 at 7:30 PM in Room 117 Millington Hall, The College of William and Mary. Dan Cristol, Assistant Professor of Biology at the College will present a talk, "The Sky Is Falling," dealing with birds foraging on clams and walnuts. Dan has done special work in this field and the actions that he discusses make you wonder about bird I.Q.!

JANUARY FIELD TRIP

The same Dan Cristol who is speaking at the January meeting will lead the January field trip. People who can't make early morning field trips will love this one. The group will meet at 11:30 at the back of the Jamestown Settlement parking lot and arrange car pooling for birding at Jamestown Island. Dan has done studies of gull foraging activities and the reason for the later start is to observe the gulls feeding in the mud flats when the tide is out. There will also be ample time for the

usual Jamestown Island birding, where this time of year we are likely to see the Red-headed Woodpecker, Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, Pileated Woodpeckers, Belted Kingfishers, Kinglets, Hermit Thrushes, Cedar Waxwings and even the Brown Creeper that is being so elusive this year.

YOU CAN BE A WINTER FINCH REPORTER

(This letter from the national Audubon Society has been slightly edited and is pretty self-explanatory.)

“Another exciting component has been added to our website with the introduction of our Winter Finch Survey.”

“The North American Winter Finch Survey encourages everyone who is seeing winter finches (Pine Siskin, Red Crossbill, White-winged Crossbill, Pine Grosbeak, Evening Grosbeak, Purple Finch, Common Redpoll and Hoary Redpoll) to report these sightings at the Bird Source Site. Also being tracked are movements of the Red-breasted Nuthatch. Bird Source monitors up-to-the-minute finch reports, allowing colorfully animated maps to be regularly updated to show how the winter finch invasion is moving. We invite you to visit the Bird Source Winter Finch Survey site at —

<http://birdsource.cornell.edu>

You may enter any winter finch or Red-breasted Nuthatch data from your Christmas count, or any other sightings you have this winter, directly into the site. You can also mail us the information. Be sure to include the date and the postal ZIP code of the sighting for each bird and mail it to BirdSource Winter Finch Survey, C/O National Audubon Society, 700 Broadway, New York, NY 10003 - 9562.”

(We will submit any data from the Christmas count or anything included in Flyer reports. ed.)

REMEMBER...SPRING LISTING STARTED JANUARY FIRST

There is a handful of loyal diehards who participate in the spring listing program every year but we'll be happy to have all of the company that we

can get. Someday this project may take on some significance other than adding to your fun of birding and giving you added incentive to get out into the field more. However, right now it is just a device to add some incentive and fun and to let you measure your effort against your prior years and against your peers. To participate:

- Get a card at the meeting or ask Bill Holcombe to mail you one.
- Record on the VSO card all of your sightings from Jan. 1 to June 30
- Mail your card to Bill Holcombe (address is on the card) in early July and you will get a report on the results in the Flyer .

We started at the beginning of January this year instead of March to give some of us a chance to get more winter water fowl and sea birds onto our cards and maybe raise our sights a bit.

CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT IDENTIFIES 110 SPECIES

Thirty participants turned out for the 98th Annual Audubon Christmas Bird Count in Williamsburg on December 21 (the Club's 21st count). When the weary group of section leaders gathered at William and Mary at 5 o'clock and combined the results, they had identified 110 species. Bill Sheehan, Club Record Keeper says that is slightly better than our average of 108 and beats last year's figure of 106.

The weather cooperated beautifully and there was no need for “long johns” that have saved the day for many birders during past counts. The mild weather may have also had something to do with the fact that while the species count was good several observers felt that their numbers were generally “off” this year. For instance, the Middle Plantation count that included hundreds of robins in '96 saw just three this year and, while ducks were not scarce, they did not literally cover the York River as they had last year in the Cheatham Annex and Camp Peary counts. And there was NO Red-headed Woodpecker seen at Jamestown Island, nor anywhere else for that matter, except for the lone report from Ford's Colony. Not a single Brown Creeper was spotted and our report to the Audubon Society had to include a note that

one **was** seen within the three days of the count date, which is a pretty weak report. Kestrels continued the weak showing of past counts with just two sighted. Last year Pintails were missing from the count for the first time in twenty years and they remained absent this year. Ruddy Ducks, at 11,476, were a far cry from over 150,000 seen last year. Cedar Waxwings at 65 were down sharply from the 553 and 621 of the past two years. Killdeer, at seven, were down sharply from the past few years.

But there were also plenty of good things to report about this count. Our notables included a Solitary Vireo, a Prairie Warbler and three Woodcocks at Cheatham Annex, Least Sandpipers and a Snow Goose at Hog Island and a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher at Middle Plantation. 79 Redhead Ducks were reported from Chatham Annex after being absent from the count for the last two years. The Bald Eagle count was strong with 26. Double-crested Cormorants continued their upwards trend of the past few years with 1,029. Horned Grebes were a fairly strong 22. Pine Warblers rose to twelve from a twenty year low of 5 last year. Chipping Sparrows improved from two to 14. Red-breasted Nuthatches got back on this year's count with two and Evening Grosbeaks returned with one sighting of seven. While some folks are finding their feeder birds a bit scarce this year, the count did not support those observations as most permanent resident bird counts were normal or showing a slight upwards trend with the exception of the Red-headed Woodpeckers, Flickers and Red-bellied Woodpecker. Red-shouldered Hawks at 17 better than doubled last year's figure.

There are no surprises in the birds that appeared on all of the nine area lists but it is notable that the Ruby-crowned Kinglet did make eight out of those nine lists. All nine lists included Great Blue Heron, Canada Goose, Turkey Vulture, Red-shouldered Hawk, Mourning Dove, Red-bellied Woodpecker, American Crow, Carolina Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, Carolina Wren, Eastern Bluebird, Northern Mockingbird, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Northern Cardinal, White-throated Sparrow, Dark-eyed Junco and Goldfinch.

These birds appeared on only one count: Black-crowned Night Heron, Snow Goose, Northern Pintail, Palm Warbler, Field Sparrow, Savannah

Sparrow — all from Hog Island; Redhead Duck, Greater Yellowlegs, Woodcock, from Cheatham Annex; Rusty Blackbird, Purple Finch, Evening Grosbeak from Camp Peary; Red-headed Woodpecker, Middle Plantation.

Now, who did all of this work? The **Camp Peary** team was Tom Armour, Jeanne Armour and Grace Doyle; at **Cheatham Annex** were Bill Williams, Hugh Beard, Ron and Bobbie Giese and Dave Shantz; at **College Woods** were Ruth Beck, Shirley Divan and Valeria Weiss; at **Hog Island** were Brian Taber, Adrienne Frank, Gary Driscoll, Alex Minarik, Randy and Jandy Strickland; at **Jamestown Island** were Dot Silsby, Sue Gray Al-Salam, Eddie Wilson; at **Jolly Pond** were Dave and Lee Schuster; at **Kingsmill** were Carol and Paul McAllister; at **Middle Plantation** were Julie Hotchkiss, Bill Holcombe, Edith Edwards, Dick Mahone and John McDowell; at **Skimino** were Betty Fields and Mary Pulley.

We will be doing this again next December on the Sunday before Christmas. That will be Audubon's 99th Christmas count which means that the big 100th Anniversary will fall in the year 1999. Why don't you plan to join us those next two years?

Bill Holcombe, Bird Count Chairman

FIELD REPORTS

The Christmas Bird Count chart provides most of this month's information but we have had some other reports that are certainly worth noting. Alex Minarik spotted twelve **Evening Grosbeaks** in the Chickahominy Wildlife Management area and **Purple Finches** and one **Pine Siskin** at her thistle feeder. Tom McCary started his monthly patrol of Lake Matoka and in addition to regular winter birds there he found **Green-winged Teal**, **American Black Ducks**, **Mallards**, **Gadwall**, **Hooded Mergansers** and **Pied-billed Grebes** on the lake. Tom also reports that he continues to see the **Red-breasted Nuthatch** at his feeder. While attempting to "pish" some birds out of a campus brush pile, he had to duck as a **Red-shouldered Hawk** burst out of the brush flying right at Tom's head! Also, last month walking on Richmond Road across from foraging starlings he saw a very swift flash of feathers, starlings scattering in all directions. When he looked over the hedge, there

was a large, immature **Red-tailed Hawk** sitting magnificently upright but with empty talons. He'd missed the starlings! Charlie Drubel spent Christmas on the Outer Banks, had his own count and reported on post cards to rub in the struggle that this compiler was having with Audubon forms. Charlie saw a variety of gulls, an **Albino Canada Goose**, **Northern Harriers**, **Snow Geese**, **Tundra Swans**, **Pintails** and the ever present **Yellow-rumped Warblers**.

BIRD OF THE MONTH

Tundra Swan

The Tundra Swan began arriving in our area in November and at least 114 (this year's Christmas count number) of them are established in their usual haunts at Hog Island, in the fields approaching Hog Island, at Sunken Meadows, along the York River and in the enclosed bodies of water near the York. We are blessed to have these magnificent birds return to us every fall and anyone who can greet their arrival without a surge of joy has a soul devoid of romance. On their powerful 6 to 7 foot wings, the swans have journeyed well over a thousand miles from the wild tundra above the Arctic Circle to their winter quarters here. Even their discovery by Merriweather Lewis on the Columbia River during the historic Lewis and Clark exploration has a wild romantic quality to it. The bird's scientific name, *alor columbianus*, comes from that discovery.

Until fairly recently, this bird was known as the Whistling Swan, the common name given to it by Lewis. As there is some debate about how much whistling is associated with this swan and no debate about its arctic nesting ground, the new name may well be more appropriate.

While both the western Trumpeter Swan and the Mute Swan are larger, the Tundra is large enough to have a rather regal presence with its all white plumage, very long straight neck and black bill (with an extension of black skins up to the eye line) and feet. The black bill frequently has a yellow spot on the black skin in front of each eye. It averages 15 pounds with males slightly larger and is 47 to 58 inches long. It is easily distinguished from the Mute Swan which has a very prominent, bright orange-red bill and holds its

neck in a graceful curve with the bill pointing downward. The Trumpeter Swan is similarly colored but is larger and is now essentially a western bird.

It is estimated that half of the Tundra Swans winter in the area of the Chesapeake Bay and Currituck Sound and the other half along the California Coast. They tend to maintain family groups of six or seven even when assembled in large flocks of several hundred. This behavior is similar to migrating geese which establish lifelong mating partnerships but I was unable to confirm it about the Tundras. Winter food consists of aquatic plants and thin-shelled mollusks. They migrate north in March and April and usually take overland routes flying in large vees at altitudes of 6,000 to 8,000 feet. This has resulted in accidents involving airplanes. Much earlier studies reported numbers of them dying as they rested on the Niagara River from being swept over the falls.

They are back on the Arctic nesting grounds by May. First year geese leave the family group and form large flocks of yearling geese. Nests are mounds of moss, dried grass and sedges one to two feet high and two to three feet across. Four to six eggs are laid and are incubated for about 30 days by the female while the male stands guard. The pure white chicks start walking from the nest almost immediately and are flying in 60 to 70 days, in time to join the flight south to Virginia, for some.

To prove that I am not the only one to view these birds as participants in a romantic saga, I am going to quote sections of the Audubon Encyclopedia of North American Birds, a well respected compendium of scientific facts. This is under the heading, "Swan Song."

"Elliot (1898), a very reliable observer, wrote that a Whistling Swan shot from considerable height over Currituck Sound, at once began its song as it fell and which continued until it struck the water. Elliot knew every note that a Whistling Swan ordinarily utters, but this one from the stricken bird was a sound that he had never heard before — 'it was the song of the dying swan.'

"Hochbaum (1955), a scientist and specialist in water fowl, wrote that the departure song of the Whistling Swan is one of the most beautiful utterances of a water fowl — a melodious, soft-

muted series of notes that always precedes its take off into the air, and that “this is probably the swan song of legend, for when one is shot and falls to the water, it utters this call as it tries in vain to rejoin its fellows in the sky.” Could anyone read that and still hunt these birds? — Bill Holcombe

OVERSIGHT

As chairperson of the Bird Club’s nominating committee, I unfortunately omitted from the proposed slate for 1998 the appointive position of Vice-President, Editor of the newsletter. Phil Young and Bill Holcombe share this responsibility. My apologies to Bill and Phil.

— Marilyn Zeigler

Williamsburg 1997 Audubon Christmas Bird Count

Common Loon	6	Red-tailed Hawk	20	Carolina Wren	90
Pied-billed Grebe	23	American Kestrel	2	Winter Wren	12
Horned Grebe	22	Merlin	1	Golden-crowned Kinglet	32
Double-crested Cormorant	1029	Wild Turkey	19	Ruby-crowned Kinglet	44
Great Blue Heron	77	Bobwhite	35	Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	1
Great Egret	2	American Coot	25	Eastern Bluebird	137
Black-crowned Night Heron	1	Killdeer	7	Hermit Thrush	7
Tundra Swan	114	Greater Yellowlegs	1	American Robin	70
Mute Swan	14	Least Sandpiper	2	North Mockingbird	31
Snow Goose	1	American Woodcock	3	Brown Thrasher	7
Canada Goose	1698	Laughing Gull	12	Cedar Waxwing	65
Wood Duck	10	Bonaparte’s Gull	46	European Starling	475
Green-winged Teal	10	Ring-billed Gull	1,261	Solitary Vireo	1
American Black Duck	132	Herring Gull	141	Yellow-rumped Warbler	158
Mallard	259	Greater Black-backed Gull	46	Pine Warbler	12
Northern Pintail	3	Rock Dove	129	Prairie Warbler	1
Gadwall	32	Mourning Dove	241	Palm Warbler	1
American Widgeon	18	Eastern Screech Owl	10	Cardinal	108
Canvasback	7,537	Great Horned Owl	3	Eastern Towhee	21
Redhead	79	Barred Owl	3	Chipping Sparrow	14
Ring-necked Duck	873	Belted Kingfisher	17	Field Sparrow	23
Lesser Scaup	4	Red-headed Woodpecker	1	Savannah Sparrow	24
scaup ,sp.	93	Red-bellied Woodpecker	37	Fox Sparrow	7
Goldeneye	16	Red-bellied Sapsucker	12	Song Sparrow	56
Bufflehead	166	Downy Woodpecker	48	Swamp Sparrow	31
Hooded Merganser	211	Hairy Woodpecker	6	White-throated Sparrow	246
Red-breasted Merganser	3	Flicker	35	Dark-eyed Junco	263
Ruddy Duck	11,476	Eastern Phoebe	5	Red-winged Blackbird	900
Black Vulture	47	Blue Jay	54	Meadow Lark	22
Turkey Vulture	242	American Crow	170	Rusty Blackbird	1
Bald Eagle	26	crow sp.	17	Common Grackle	60
Adult	8	Carolina Chickadee	185	Brown-headed Cowbird	9
Imm.	18	Tufted Titmouse	109	Purple Finch	2
Northern Harrier	7	Red-breasted Nuthatch	2	House Finch	38
Sharp-shinned Hawk	2	White-breasted Nuthatch	50	Am. Goldfinch	126
Cooper’s Hawk	3	Brown-Headed Nuthatch	12	Evening Grosbeak	7
Red-shoulder Hawk	17	Brown Creeper (w.c.)	1	House Sparrow	14