



THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

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NEXT MEETING

Our next meeting will be on Wednesday, February 18, 1998 at 7:30 PM in Room 117 Millington Hall, William & Mary Campus. Chris Gordon, one of the two graduate students who received our 1998 research grants will present a talk entitled "Where Have All the Skimmers Gone?" Chris began his research on the conservation ecology of Black Skimmers in 1997 and we look forward to having a glimpse of a research program in progress.

FEBRUARY FIELD TRIP

As usual, the monthly field trip is scheduled for the Saturday morning immediately following the date of our regular meeting — February 21, 1998. This month Bill Williams will take us to Cheatham Annex.

Cheatham Annex is an exceptionally fine birding location because of the variety of habitats there: fields, heavily briared underbrush, pine stands, hardwood forest, ponds and the York River. It is not unusual for birders spending a full day there to see over one hundred species.

FIELD NOTES

For those who think that birding in January is not worth the effort it may come as a surprise to know that a total of 101 species were reported to the keeper of the books, Bill Sheehan. And true to the Sheehan philosophy, the count did NOT include Rock Doves nor English Sparrows. It did include some very nice birds such as the Red-throated Loons off Yorktown beach and the five Gannets that were fishing in the same area, "flashing in that

early morning sun as they hit the water," said Sheehan. McDowell and Holcombe might have shared this sight but they had followed directions from Sheehan and Armour to go back up the river to Felsgate where the Red-necked Grebe was still performing in close to the shore. A "life list" for Holcombe who learned that to find the Red-necked look for the more common Eared Grebe and when you find one with a yellow bill you've got a Red-necked. Pat Sgrinia sighted the first Osprey of '98 on the Toano Reservoir but adds that it's been there since December. A Great Cormorant was spotted on the Route 5 Chickahominy bridge in the midst of a zillion Double-crested. And a flock of Wild Turkeys were in nearby Berrets Landing. Dick Mahone's Ring-necked Pheasant was back feeding with his Guinea Hens. Brown Pelicans are back on the York and the James and a Black-crowned Night Heron was frequently in a tree near the Kingsmill marina for the past two weeks. The unusual Common Merganser was spotted on the York River and on Kingsmill Pond while its cousins, the Hooded and Red-breasted Mergansers were just about everywhere that water flowed or sat. Dunlin were spotted perched on the causeway to Jamestown Island, apparently waiting for the tide to drop, and Snipe were flushed near the shore end of the causeway by Dan Crystal. Marilyn Ziegler found one of this year's very scarce Brown Creepers plus a Hairy Woodpecker in Bassett Woods. Ruth Beck reported seeing Pine Siskins at Barhamsville (and they've been even more elusive than the Creepers). And, happily, for the third month in a row, we have an Evening Grosbeak report; this one by Gary Driscoll from Oakland Farms. Joy Archer kept the Red-breasted Nuthatch sightings intact with a report from Jamestown Farms. And

twenty Bald Eagles were reported at Barlow's Pond when the pond's surface became loaded with dead fish!

Jamestown Island and nearby Parkway — Black Duck, Bald Eagle, Red-shouldered Hawk, Killdeer, Dunlin, Snipe, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Kingfisher, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Brown-headed Nuthatch, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Hermit Thrush, Cedar Waxwing, Towhee, Chipping Sparrow, Swamp Sparrow.

Ferry and James River — Horned Grebe, Pied-billed Grebe, Brown Pelican, Lesser Scaup, Bufflehead, Red-breasted Merganser, Ruddy Duck, Bonaparte's Gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Forster's Tern, Fish Crow.

Chippokes — Bald Eagle, Red-shouldered Hawk, Kestrel, Wild Turkey, Killdeer, Kingfisher, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Eastern Towhee, Cedar Waxwing, Chipping Sparrow, Meadowlark.

Hog Island — Great Egret, Tundra Swan, Black Duck, Pintail, American Widgeon, Bald Eagle, Red-shouldered Hawk, Rough-legged Hawk, Kestrel, Killdeer, Great-horned Owl, Kingfisher.

York River and Nearby Parkway and Ponds — Red-throated Loon, Common Loon, Pied-billed Grebe, Horned Grebe, Red-necked Grebe, Gannett, Brown Pelican, Tundra Swan, American Widgeon, Canvasback, Lesser Scaup, Common Goldeneye, Bufflehead, Hooded Merganser, Common Merganser, Red-breasted Merganser.

Sunken Meadow — Tundra Swan, Mute Swan, Pintail, Gadwall, American Widgeon, Hooded Merganser.

Camp Peary — Pied-billed Grebe, Tundra Swan, Mute Swan, Canvasback, Redhead, Ring-necked Duck, Common Goldeneye, Bufflehead, Hooded Merganser, Red-breasted Merganser, Ruddy Duck, Black Vulture, Bald Eagle, Red-shouldered Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk, Kestrel, Killdeer, Kingfisher, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Hairy Woodpecker, Eastern Phoebe, Brown-headed Nuthatch, Hermit Thrush, Brown Thrasher, Rufous-sided Towhee.

RENEWED YOUR MEMBERSHIP YET?

Send a check to Chuck Rend at the return address on this newsletter or bring it to the next meeting.

NEW MEMBERS

Welcome to the following new members:

Halsey & Mary Griswold
3036 Whitaker Island Road, Williamsburg

Matthew & Ruth Ellen McCullough
5614 Boatwright Circle, Williamsburg

TIMELY MIGRATION STORIES FROM RECENT PERIODICALS

Lights Out for Urban Birds:

During migration many birds rely in part on the position of the moon and constellations to guide them during night flights. But while flying across cities, particularly when its overcast, they are often drawn to lights shining from skyscrapers. Many of the birds slam into windows and die. Others, dazed or unconscious, drop to the city pavement below — only to be eaten by predators or swept up by street cleaners. Every year at least 100 million birds die after colliding with man-made structures.

The problem has been severe enough to spawn "FLAP," the Fatal Light Awareness Program. The Toronto based program, in conjunction with the World Wildlife Fund, enlists two dozen volunteers to rescue and release birds before dawn and to advise office building managers on low-tech solutions. As of last fall, FLAP listed 124 species killed or injured; among them were White-throated Sparrows, Ovenbirds, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, Wood Thrushes and Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers. "They're drawn to building lights as deer are drawn to headlights," says Michael Measure, FLAP president. To date, he has enrolled 90 buildings in a 12-step, bird-friendly program that focuses on turning off the lights at night using blinds, curtains, and desk lamps and establishes interior night time work areas. *David Seideman, Audubon, Feb. '98*

Good News About Ducks

A rather long story in the Wall St. Journal from Hartford, Kansas contains these highlights:

“Fueled by the same melting snows and rains that flooded the Dakotas a year ago, most duck species were at or near record numbers when this fall’s migration began. For instance, Mallards were far above the long-term average and just a few percentage points below the record set 40 years ago. Gadwalls, Shovelers and Blue and Green-winged Teal migrated in numbers never before seen in modern times.”

“They’re (Lesser Snow Geese) at unprecedented highs...and are so abundant they’re causing virtually irreparable damage to their Arctic breeding ground.”

The article explains that ten years of extremely dry conditions on the nesting grounds of the Dakotas, Montana and Western Minnesota starting in 1980 decimated flocks that normally nested there. This problem resulted in a joint program with Canada, the North American Waterfowl Management Plan which has been very helpful in restoring habitat. Then a U.S. plan, Conservation Reserve Program, converted large blocks of marginal farm land back to prairie grasslands. When the rains returned in 1994 an abundance of waterfowl nesting habitat had been established and populations exploded.

Masters of the Breeze (excerpts):

Of the many ways animals react to wind, none is so studied or so perplexing as the phenomenon of avian migration. Scientists know that prevailing wind patterns have helped shape major migratory flyways world wide and that extreme winds can carry small birds thousands of miles outside their normal range. In general, birds will wait to embark on a migration until they can fly with tail winds. Birds can sense minute barometric changes, which means they have a natural device for tracking weather systems and, perhaps, for figuring the direction of winds. Indeed, they appear to be so sensitive to such meteorological cues, which also include temperature, humidity levels and cloud cover, that some people believe they may be able to use the approach of fronts as a navigational guide. En route, patches of turbulence and rolling waves of dense air tend to bunch them, as one biologist noted, as flotsam on the sea.

Rather than fight a head wind, a small bird in the midst of a long flight may settle down to wait for a weather change — that is, if it is not passing over inhospitable country or water. Sidney Gauthreaux, Jr., a Clemson University ornithologist who has conducted radar studies since the 1950’s, has seen thousands of warblers killed by the onset of a “blue northern” during spring migration over the Gulf of Mexico. “Most warblers have an air speed of only twenty knots (23 miles an hour,)” he says, “and when they meet head winds of about thirty knots, they lose ground.” The birds beat their way northward flying as close as they dare to the water, where the speed of the wind is least. They land as quickly as possible perching in miserable huddles on light towers, ship rails and drilling platforms. “I’ve seen oil rigs covered with dead and exhausted birds after one of those storms,” Gauthreaux says. *(He goes on to observe that while strong fronts can ground the migrants, they can climb above the weaker fronts and continue. While soaring birds migrate by day to use the rising thermals, slow fliers migrate at night to avoid the interference of those same thermals.)* The article concludes: “Yet the birds ability to make their way to far-flung forests and velds remains one of the grand mysteries of life.”

From "Masters of the Breeze" by Jan Deblieu, Audubon, February '98.

1997 BIRD CLUB LIBRARY PROGRAM

For many years the Bird Club has purchased birding books and audio-video tapes for the Williamsburg Regional Library. Club liaison for this activity is long time bird club member, Alice Springe. She recently received a “Thank you” for the club’s 1997 donations. You may not only be interested in what the club has done, you may want to make use of some of these fine materials.

One of these, the videotape Watching Warblers was a huge hit when shown at a club meeting and it is now in the loan department. So are the books, Birds of Forest, Yard and Thicket by John Eastman and, The Backyard Bird Watcher: How to Create a Wild Bird Sanctuary by George H. Harrison. Ordered but not yet delivered are audio tapes, Stokes Field Guide to Eastern Birds and

Songbirds: Celebrating Nature's Voices. And, of course, we always supply a subscription to *Bird-watchers Digest*. Your donations to the library for 1997 totaled \$127.22. A club name plate identifies our many excellent purchases over the years.

BIRD OF THE MONTH

The Great Horned Owl

by *Bill Holcombe*

Even as you read this month's *Flyer*, the first mother birds are incubating eggs in their nests. The birds are Great Horned Owls. "HE" probably started hooting his sweet nothings in December and "SHE" probably started sitting on the eggs in late January or early February. One of the largest and most powerful of North American owls, the Great Horned starts the annual bird nesting season in most of the United States and Canada. But we have a special claim to them, as the bird's genus name is *Bubo virginianus*.

This bird is not only big and strong it is also smart and has adapted to living in cities, suburbs, parks, wood lots and forests all over North America. It feeds on almost any living thing that is smaller than it is, including birds, ducks, geese, cats, dogs, rabbits, mink, weasels, squirrels, frogs, snakes and crayfish. It has been known to go down chimneys after swifts and is so fond of skunks that both the bird and the nest frequently reek of that odor.

The name comes from the great size and the very prominent tufts of feathers sticking up on either side of the head. While there are several other owls with "ear" tufts, if you see one in this area you're almost certain that it is this bird. Great Horned Owls stand 18 to 23 inches tall and have a wing span of 36 to 60 inches. In general the body is brown, spotted with darker brown. Eyes are large and yellow. White throat feathers contrast with cross-barred under parts. The feathering on the legs extends down to pale yellow feet.

You are much more likely to hear than to see this bird. Its six-noted hoot is quite distinctive starting with a single "Hoo" followed by three sort of syncopated "Hoo's," and then finishes with two single "Hoo's." (Its cousin, the Barred Owl, with whom it shares our area, has an eight-noted hoot done in pairs with the final note falling into a slur

— "hoo-hoo, hoo-hoo, hoo-hoo, hoo-howah," some times described as, "Who cooks, who cooks, who cooks, who cooks for me.")

Although it is primarily a nocturnal bird, the Great Horned can and does hunt both night and day. It has a highly developed third eye lid which protects the sensitive retina from bright daylight. But it is the owl's ears that have been so wonderfully adapted for hunting. Openings on the sides of the head are wide and covered with feathers that can be directed to funnel sound into ears. Because the ears are not symmetrically placed and are not the same size nor shape, they assist the owl in pinpointing the sources of sounds by a form of triangulation. Authorities say that this owl can hear a mouse squeak from fifty yards away, locate it precisely, and then silently swoop to the prey. The wings have an adaptation that kills the sound of the air passing over them. (Edith Edwards, a Bird Club member, observed this when an owl got into her screened porch. It could not find its way out and continued to circle within the walls making not a sound.)

The nests that those mama owls are sitting in are most likely former nests of hawks, or crows or squirrels. The Great Horned will also take over nests of eagles or herons, or use a hollow tree. Typically three eggs are laid on successive days. The pair share the incubation of about thirty days and flight follows in about seventy. Feeding the young is shared by both parents. When the young start hunting with their parents they can fill the darkness with blood-curdling screams, sometimes interpreted as pleas for food.

Banded birds have had age recorded at 14 years and birds in captivity have lived to 29 years.

You may hear the Great Horned Owl almost anywhere in this vicinity. They have been seen and heard in Kingsmill, Kingswood, Graylin Woods, Jamestown Island, Cheatham Annex and many other neighborhoods. While we saw and heard a Barred Owl rather frequently over a two year period in Graylin Woods and believed that we were within its normal hunting range, the sightings of the Great Horned have been rare and without pattern. So have been the hootings. One might hear them three or four times in a two week period and then not again for several months. But what a

wild, wonderful sound it is when that deep
booming , “hoooo,” comes out of the night!

References were The Audubon Encyclopedia of
North American Birds by John Terres and Roger
Tory Peterson’s Field Guide of Eastern Birds