



# THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

Volume 22, Number 7

August 1998

## A NEW MEETING ROOM!

We next meet on Wednesday, **September 16** at 7:30 PM in **Room 211** Millington Hall on the William and Mary campus. Note this is one flight up from our usual room. It will be our meeting place for the fall semester. The September *Flyer* will give you another reminder. There is no August meeting.

## RUTH BECK TAKES US TO CRANEY ISLAND AUGUST 15

If you've been to Craney with Ruth before you know what a wonderful day of birding this usually is. If you've never been you certainly owe it to yourself to make the trip. While birding doesn't offer any guarantees as to what we'll find, past trips have seen Black-necked Stilts, Avocets, Black Skimmer, Horned Larks, lots of Sandpipers, Terns, Plovers and Gulls and, less frequently, Godwits and a Wilson Phalarope. You can have a bright, breezy day or a still, hot and hazy one so come prepared with hat, long sleeves and pants and insect repellent. You will also need some lunch and cold drinks. Craney is roughly an hour away. We'll leave the C.W. Visitor Center parking lot (right side as you enter) at 7:30 AM. We should be back in town by 1:30 to 2:00. Ruth says that some of the nesters are still around and the migrants are starting to show, so this should be its usual great day for birding at Craney Island.

## SPRING PICNIC ENJOYED BY ALL

Ruth and Sherwin Beck hosted our annual gathering at their lovely home once more and to no one's surprise the event was a great success.

The weather was cool and clear, but for some reason the bird walk yielded only a few calls. The birds must have been off having a picnic of their own somewhere else. They missed a good party!

Persons attending were: Ann Moore & Tom Ellis, Joy Archer, James & Phoebe Kent, Tom McCary, Bill & Nancy Davies, Phyllis Johnson, Charles & Jeanne Rend, Joe & Grace Doyle, Dave & Lee Schuster, Grant Olsen, Peg Smith, Ron & Bobbie Geise, Tom & Jeanne Armour, Sam Hart, Anne & Phil Young, Jane & Bill Holcombe, John McDowell and Caroline Lowe.

## PEREGRINE FALCONS THRIVING IN NEW YORK

*(From a July 14 New York Times story clipped by Charlie Drubel)*

The Peregrine Falcons reintroduced to New York City in the 1980's by Cornell University are doing just fine. Twelve nesting pairs are identified there. They gave birth to about 24 chicks, of which twenty survive. A ledge between the 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> floors of the New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center (overlooking the Hudson River near the George Washington Bridge) has been home to breeding falcons since 1988. Employees there are charmed "by the truly joyous breeding sounds" which mark springtime in Manhattan. A biologist with the city Department of Environmental Affairs says that the mating competition among males can get pretty bloodthirsty. "We see a lot of battling out there and sometimes the birds will kill each other."

The article identifies nests on the Throgs Neck Bridge and at 48 Wall Street as well as at the Medical Center. It indicates that bridges are

especially successful breeding places as the birds like the open rivers for moving about. They have been clocked at more than 200 miles an hour in their daily hunts for New York's pigeons. The Peregrines are year 'round residents not only in New York but in Baltimore, Seattle, Chicago, Boston, Toronto and other major cities where they have been reintroduced.

Brian Taber and Bill Williams will be especially interested in hearing that on one day last fall the N.Y. Parks Department Team counted 1,184 migrating hawks, 54 osprey and 4 bald eagles. The migrating birds passed at the rate of 15 a minute!

Apparently, everyone is happy with this story except the New York pigeons!

## **WORLDS' UGLIEST INTERSECTION — GOOD BIRDING SPOT IN FUTURE?**

For the past couple of years there's been little at the intersection of Route 199 and Route 5 to cheer the passerby's soul. That may be about to change and Brian Taber called to put a birder's optimistic spin on the outcome. The County and VDT have announced that funds have been set aside to make this a beautiful entryway into the city. We certainly hope so. But right now we don't know how much money is involved or what the beautification plans are. Anyway, Brian passes by there frequently and has begun noticing shore birds down by the water hole we hope someday could become a charming pond. One day recently he saw a Least Sandpiper, two Solitary Sandpipers and 17 Killdeer poking around the edges.

Recalling the variety of shore birds attracted to the wet area inside the fence at Drumonds field, with the busy Geenspring Road a few feet away, Brian speculates that if there is enough money and it is spent wisely, we may find another such spot at the edge of a busy intersection. Brian invites anyone so inclined to urge the authorities to make something truly attractive and rewarding out of this place that has been such a miserable irritant for so long.

## **K.E.S.T.R.E.L.'s '98 COMPETITION**

### **Support "The Kiptopeke Challenge"**

Tom Armour, Brian Taber and Bill Williams will participate in the 1998 Eastern Shore team birding competition for the benefit of K.E.S.T.R.E.L.. This is the fourth time these stalwarts have taken to the field. In doing so they help raise money for the organization that has built the Kiptopeke birding station into a significant source of migration data on the east coast. Last year this event was called the "Super Bowl of Birding." Unlike many other bird spotting competitions, this one is held in September during the post-breeding migration when there are fewer bright plumage markers and very little song to help the identification.

Club members have been very supportive of this fund raising event but this year there is a new obstacle to overcome. The event will be on September 12 — and we don't meet until the 16<sup>th</sup>, so the normal meeting time to collect pledges of financial support comes too late. Accordingly, the team asks that you MAI L your pledges or checks payable to K.E.S.T.R.E.L. to Brian Taber, 103 Exeter Court, Williamsburg, VA 23185 and to do so by August 31<sup>st</sup>. Support can be in the form of pledges per-species-located or a flat amount. As there will be no further communication until after the event, the team thanks you in advance for whatever contribution you can make. As always, supporters will receive a report of the day's activities and a list of all the birds found. Let's have lots of renewals and new supporters for this worthy cause and a good luck wish for the team!

## **SPRING LISTING PROGRAM ENDS** by Bill Holcombe

The spring listing competition usually starts in a whirl of anticipation because 20 to 25 cards were requested. However, we ended in June with just five returns; from Martha Briggs, Hugh Beard, Tom Armour, Bill Sheehan and Bill Holcombe.

Martha usually includes a letter with an interesting incident in her spring birding. This year she distinctly heard a Whip-poor-will calling, not rare on her Southhampton County place. But something was wrong with it calling at four in the

afternoon. She searched out the mystery and found a Mockingbird “whip-poor-willing” its heart out! She also reported a plaintive mystery of a single Canada Goose returning to her pond in April, where traditionally she had seen a pair. The goose hung around the pond honking to itself occasionally until about the time the goslings usually hatch. Then it was gone. Her unanswerable question: was this one of the usual pair back without its mate or was it just some strange loner?

Tom Armour didn't tell any stories. He just listed 174 species. But even that feat had its frustrations. Despite listing almost every duck on the card the Northern Pintail eluded him the entire season. But talk about consistency! I couldn't find last year's card, but in '96 he had 175 species and in '95, 178.

Bill Sheehan had 151 species with the usual disclaimer that “Starlings, Rock Doves and House Sparrows are not birds”. This compared with 163 in '96 and 162 in '95. Hugh Beard sent a note saying that he got into the field more by keeping the card than he otherwise might have. He listed 142 birds. Holcombe (me) is totally inconsistent with 121 species this year, 153 in '95 and 98 in '95. Maybe it is time to find a different springtime stimulus.

## FIELD NOTES: JUNE AND JULY

*(Most common resident and migrating species NOT included.)*

While the excellent birding of June fell off some in July, we still had some interesting reports. Martha Briggs found a **Mockingbird** making like a **Whip-poor-will**! Bill Sheehan is as delighted with the **Chimney Swifts** that he has nesting in his (you guessed it!) chimney as he is with any of the summer bird sightings. Joe Doyle had a **Black-crowned Night Heron** at Camp Peary. Brian Taber had **Solitary Sandpipers** and a **Least Sandpiper** at the intersection of 199 and Route 5. Ruth Beck had new gates put in place to keep the **Black Skimmer** and **Common Tern** chicks from wandering off from their tunnel island nesting sanctuary and falling into 65 mph automobile traffic below. (The Hampton Roads tunnel island is one of Ruth's more unusual nesting sanctuaries!) On one of those hot, humid, hazy July days

Bill Sheehan got a post card from the cool, crisp, pine-scented Grand Tetons where Ty and Julie Hotchkiss were enjoying **Trumpeter Swans** and **Ruffed Grouse**. As Bill Holcombe was talking to Ruth Beck on the phone he saw a Prothonotary Warbler land on his tomato vines. (Call Ruth, look out the window and improve your birding!)

*(Bird sightings for June and July, with the exception of Camp Peary, were not received segregated by location, so birds will be grouped by habitat accompanied by the most likely locations for observation.)*

**Shore birds:** Great Egret, Snowy Egret, Green-backed Heron, Mute Swan, Blue-winged Teal, Killdeer, Greater Yellowlegs, Lesser Yellowlegs, Solitary Sandpiper, Spotted Sandpiper, Bonaparte's Gull, Royal Tern, Common Tern, Least Tern. All of these could have been seen at Hog Island. The more likely location of the Green-backed Tern would be the Colonial Parkway, at the Chippokes Swamp on the way to the island or York River State Park.

**Woods and Water Mix:** (As at Jamestown Island) Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Great Horned Owl, Barred Owl, Chimney Swift, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Belted Kingfisher, Red-headed Woodpecker, Hairy Woodpecker, Eastern Wood-peewee, Acadian Flycatcher, Eastern Phoebe, Eastern Kingbird, Purple Martin, Tree Swallow, Northern Rough-winged Swallow, Barn Swallow, Wood Thrush. (The Screech Owl belongs in this group but has a specialized location at the Vineyards.) York River State Park, Jamestown Island and the nearby Colonial Parkway would be good locations, with Yellow-billed Cuckoos, Chimney Swifts, Ruby-throated Hummingbirds and Swallows being readily observed or heard over much of the Williamsburg area.

**Vireos and Warblers:** White-eyed Vireo, Solitary Vireo, Yellow-throated Vireo, Red-eyed Vireo, Northern Parula, Yellow-throated Warbler, Prairie Warbler, Black and White Warbler, American Red-start, Prothonotary Warbler, Ovenbird, Louisiana Waterthrush, Kentucky Warbler, Common Yellow Throat, Hooded Warbler, Yellow-breasted Chat, Summer Tanager, Scarlet Tanager. While no one could expect to find all of these in one place, trips in June and July to York River State Park, Chippokes State

Park, College Woods and County Road would likely produce several of them. The Yellow-breasted Chat is most likely found in certain parts of Hog Island.

**The Rest of the List:** Blue Grosbeaks, Indigo Buntings and Orchard Oriole are most likely found at Hog Island. The Indigo Bunting is often seen in Vireo and Warbler locations.

**Eastern Meadowlarks** were observed and are most commonly found in Chippokes State Park and along the Colonial Parkway.

**Camp Peary:** Great Egret, Snowy Egret, Pied-billed Grebe, Green-backed Heron, Black-crowned Night Heron, Mute Swan, Wood Duck, Bald Eagle, Kestrel, Wild Turkey, Northern Bobwhite, Clapper Rail, Killdeer, Common Tern, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Chimney Swift, Belted Kingfisher, Red-headed Woodpecker, Eastern Wood-Pee-wee, Acadian Flycatcher, Great-crested Flycatcher, Tree Swallow, Northern Rough-winged Swallow, Barn Swallow, Brown-headed Nuthatch, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Wood Thrush, Brown Thrasher, White-eyed Vireo, Red-eyed Vireo, Northern Parula, Yellow-throated Warbler, Prairie Warbler, Ovenbird, Louisiana Waterthrush, Common Yellowthroat, Hooded Warbler, Yellow-breasted Chat, Summer Tanager, Scarlet Tanager, Blue Grosbeak, Indigo Bunting, Field Sparrow, Brown-headed Cowbird, Orchard Oriole.

## BIRD OF THE MONTH

### **The Purple Martin** by Bill Holcombe

On a recent summer evening we sat on the river bank and watched Purple Martins swooping and soaring around my friend's on-a-pole Martin House. Two days later he told me that they had completely disappeared. That led me to look up this common summer visitor we are all so happy to have around clearing the air of flying bugs.

This blue-black member of the swallow family arrives in our area in March-April. Incubation and fledging of a brood take about seven weeks after mating and house selection take place. My friend's Martins seemed right on schedule to take the young from the house and have the whole family use the next six-seven weeks to fatten up for the trip back to South America. They congreg-

ate in large flocks to make the trip. Unlike many of our migrants which hatch two broods, Martins have just one.

This bird has been around for a long time and got its Latin name, *Progne subis*, from Pliny the Roman naturalist. However, the translation, *a bird that breaks eagle's eggs*, leaves us looking blankly at the Roman's *non sequitur*. Long before that this bird, which is totally dependent upon an insect diet, was making its twice-a-year, thousand mile trip between North and South America to find abundant flying insect life.

The Purple Martin is the largest member of the swallow family. Despite the name, the male is a solid blue-black all over. The tail is moderately forked. The females and immatures are gray to white below and sometimes have gray patches above. The bird is about 8 inches long with a 15-inch wingspan. It apparently never nested in forested North America and sought open river valleys, grassy meadows and coastal marshes. It nested in woodpecker holes, cavities in cliffs and rock piles, holes in cactus in the southwest, and in gourds and calabashes that Indians used to entice them to their villages. While some such nesting sites may still be in use, multi-compartment bird houses throughout the United States have become the most common nesting site.

Martins appear migrating northward in the U.S. from late January to April. Actual dates can vary year to year by as much as two to three weeks as the birds must follow an active insect population that depends on temperatures warm enough to support them. Sometimes "advance scouts" get caught in temperature down turns and suffer for it. Males usually arrive ahead of females at the nesting place (March in our area.) According to some observers, the male defends a room in the multi-dwelling and when the female selects a room she also acquires a mate. Both sexes work at building the nest of grass, leaves and twigs which sometimes has an earthen rim in front of the door. The rim is assumed to prevent eggs from rolling out. The female incubates 4 to 5 eggs (14 to 16 days) and the male guards the doorway in her absence. Fledglings leave the nest in about 49 days. The birds feed on all kinds of flying insects caught in the air and to a lesser extent on insects and caterpillars on the ground. If you have a

Martin house, Terres recommends scattering chicken egg shells on the ground nearby. Martins eat them avidly. There are records of adverse weather such as continuous heavy rains or unusually low temperatures reducing the numbers of airborne insects and causing widespread starvation of Martins.

Miscellaneous facts: Banded birds have been recovered after seven or eight years. There are few records of successful cowbird predation, instead, records exist of Martins pushing Cowbird eggs out of the nest box. The nesting range is U.S. and southern Canada west of the Sierra Nevada and Cascade ranges and east of the Rocky Mountains but with large unexplained gaps in this territory.

Whenever I look up the story of a rather common bird, such as the Purple Martin, I am struck by what really “uncommon” lives these tiny creatures live. Most Purple Martins weigh less than two ounces!

**References:** *The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds* by John Terres and Roger Tory Peterson's *Field Guide to the Birds East of the Rockies*

## REMEMBER LAST WINTER'S FINCH WATCH?

On several occasions at last winter's meetings, you may recall Lee Schuster asking for reports of winter finches and grosbeaks so she could report them to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology study of the winter movements of these birds. That study tracked some phenomenal bird movements. While little of that activity was evident in our area it is an intriguing bird story. It appeared in the Lab's publication, *Birdscope* just as we were closing up for the summer break. Some highlights:

When it comes to winter finches, the 1997-98 season has hardly been typical:

“Since last fall, much of the United States has been experiencing a winter finch invasion of monumental proportions. During an invasion, one or more finch species move south from their traditional wintering areas in what are called an ‘irruption.’ Evidence suggests that irruptions are associated with broad-scale changes in food supply in the species’ traditional ranges.”

These movements were tracked in over 5,500 reports received from the North American Winter Finch Survey on the Lab's web site <<http://birdsource.cornell.edu>>. Lee's reports were included in that count. The survey covered Pine Grosbeaks, Evening Grosbeaks, Common Redpolls, Hoary Redpolls, Pine Siskins, Red-breasted Nuthatches, Red-crossbills and White-winged Crossbills.

It quickly became clear that the '97 - '98 winter would be extraordinary. Steve Kelling, the project coordinator, says that by October all of the winter finches except the Hoary Redpoll had been reported in Ithaca and that hadn't happened in 20 years.

“A thousand Pine Grosbeaks were observed in Duluth, Minnesota in November. Hoary Redpolls were found in the Great Lakes area and into northern New England by November 10 — incredible when you bear in mind that during the massive Redpoll invasion of 1981-82, it took until mid-January for these arctic dwellers to show up in the States. And while Evening Grosbeaks do invade southerly regions like Tennessee, it's highly unusual for them to do so by mid-November, as they did this season.” Flocks of White-winged Crossbills were reported in Tennessee, a state with only three previous sightings. Large numbers of Red-breasted Nuthatches were reported in Texas where the bird is normally viewed as a rare winter visitor.

When several of the winter finches irrupt simultaneously these specialists refer to the phenomenon as a “superflight” and that is what the '97 - '98 winter became. Steve Kelling says this was the first since the '82-'83 winter and the last before that was the winter of '68-'69.

“Looking through the eyes of thousands of people across North America has given us an unprecedented view of a major biological event while it was unfolding,” says Kelling. He invites birders to visit the web site to report any winter activities seen this fall or just to enjoy the information obtainable.