



# THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

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## NEXT MEETING

Believe it or not, summer is over and we next meet on September 16 in second floor Room 211 Millington Hall, at 7:30 PM. This will be our meeting room at least until next semester.

Dr. Bryan Watts of the Conservation Biology Center, William & Mary, will discuss a recent study, "Fall Migration in the Upper Bay of Panama."

## SEPTEMBER FIELD TRIP

A trip to Kiptopeke State Park on the eastern shore is planned as the next field trip, September 10, 1998. People at the banding station there expect that weekend to be right at the peak of this fall's hawk migration. As usual, the group will gather in the parking lot to the right of the CW Visitor Center for a 7:30 AM departure. Bring a lunch along, as the group will probably return to Williamsburg late in the afternoon.

## PRESIDENT'S CORNER

As I write this fall greeting, it is the middle of August; and it's pretty quiet out there in birdland. One song per bird seems to be the limit. During this season of moulting there are some strange sights in my back yard: cardinals with gray heads, tufted titmice with no tufts, and starlings so blotchy-looking that they are almost unrecognizable.

It is the perfect time of year to go to Craney Island with Ruth Beck. This trip has kindled enthusiasm for the fall migration of waterfowl and warblers as well as for going to York River State Park to see some of the sixty bluebirds fledged this breeding season under the care and supervision of Shirley

Devan and Dorothy Whitfield. What a banner year. And Shirley tells me there are more to hatch!

We begin our season with the September 16 meeting in our new upstairs meeting room in Millington Hall. I know Hugh Beard has interesting programs planned and Ron Geise enjoyable field trips for both near and far during the year. See you there! — Joy Archer

## DID YOU REMEMBER KESTREL?

If you intended to make a contribution to support our bird watching team and then the thought slipped away, bring your money to the September meeting. We can still get it to K.E.S.T.R.E.L. where it will help further the activities at Kiptopeke. There will be four staff people there starting in early September with responsibilities for hawk count, hawk banding, song bird banding and public education. A day at Kiptopeke can make a wonderful trip as the weather cools and the hawk migrations begin.

## BACK YARD SURPRISE

By Shirley Devan

I had an immature northern harrier in my back yard on Friday, August 28. I observed him for about thirty minutes sitting on a small maple sapling about twenty feet from my breakfast window.

I had just gone to Hog Island hoping to see some unusual birds blown in by Hurricane Bonnie. The extreme heat discouraged me from staying there for very long, so I headed home with no unusual sightings. Then, in the most unlikely place, I saw this huge bird right outside my window. He had a rufous breast with white speckles; the wings were gray with white speckles. The head was white and

the neck feathers were not yet fully developed. The beak was also white or ivory. He (or she) looked a bit scruffy around the neck and head—definitely that "immature" look. He seemed perfectly calm, but alert, checking out the unfamiliar territory.

The most curious behavior came from the other birds around the harrier. A pair of cardinals were not intimidated in the least. For the full thirty minutes, they flitted around in the holly trees unafraid of the predator. Then a hummingbird arrived, buzzed the harrier and took a perch on the next tree. Then the hummer took off, hovered directly in front of the harrier, giving him a good look as if saying, "You're new here, aren't you?" and then returned to his perch. Meanwhile, the cardinals were still cavorting all around. I perched in my own roost in the second floor window looking down on the entire scene. Afraid to leave for fear that I would not see him fly away, I tasked my husband with bringing me various bird books so that I could identify this unusual bird. Then, in a blink the harrier was gone from his perch. A short time later I saw him flying off through the woods behind our street.

The next morning, I surprised the harrier (and myself!) when I opened my sliding glass door and startled him from his perch on a split rail fence next door. Again he flew off into the woods and landed higher in a tree, but still visible. Before I could get my binoculars or my husband could get his camera, he took off again.

## GOOD DAY AT CRANEY ISLAND

We saw a lot of really interesting birds at Craney Island on August 15 when Ruth Beck toured us around this protected nesting site. Incidentally, Ruth is the person responsible for having it declared a protected wildlife site.

Several Wilson's Phalaropes, with their needle bills and strange gyrations, were closely viewed for quite a long time. Many dainty looking Black-necked Stilts with the magenta legs were sighted. The two American Avocets were in black and white winter dress without the colorful orangish wash on the long neck. Three Black Skimmers

whirled gracefully about and plowed furrows in the water with their immense bills. Terns included Gull-billed, Royal, Caspian, Common and Least. Sandpipers included Greater and Lesser Yellow-legs, Solitary, Spotted, Stilt, Red Knots, Ruddy Turnstones, Semipalmated, Western, Least, White-rumped and Willets. Plovers were Black-bellied, Semipalmated and Killdeer. All of these wonderful birds plus some more pedestrian cousins totaled 47 species.

And incidently, we all clearly saw why Tom Armour is part of the Kiptopeke listing team. It was amazing how many of these species he searched out of the vast flocks of feeding shore birds. And by early afternoon Ruth Beck had most of us sorting out the look-alike peep sandpipers: If the legs are yellow, it's a Least. If legs and bill are black it's a Semipalmated unless the bill is heavy and long, then it's a Western. The White-rump's wings are so long that they project beyond the tail when the bird is on the ground.

It was a grand day and the appreciative group included Joy Archer, Tom Armour, Camilla Buchanan, Melody Campbell, Kathleen Coleman, Shirley Devan, Bill Holcombe, Tom McCary, John McDowell, Alice Lee Sargeant, Jandy Strickland, Kay and Ron West.

## FIELD NOTES FOR AUGUST

*(Permanent residents and the very common migrators are not usually included.)*

Brian Taber and Bill Williams are usually somewhere getting dashed around by the tail-end of a hurricane as it goes by, looking to see what birds have been blown in by the storm. Some of us who went to the Parkway the morning after Bonnie found nothing to report. But Brian was down on the Bay-Bridge Tunnel on Thursday as the storm approached Norfolk and again Saturday with Bill Williams. On Thursday Brian saw three **Sooty Terns** and a **Jaeger** which could not be more closely identified. On Saturday he and Bill saw four **Bridled Terns** and hundreds of warblers swept up on the northeast flow of the wind. Tom Armour did not need a hurricane to pick a **Black Tern** out of the birds around the ferry in early

September. Charles Rend' s breeding **Worm-eating Warbler**, seen at York State Park, was a very unusual find and the first confirmation of this bird breeding here.

**Jamestown Island and Adjacent Parkway:**

Great Egret, Osprey, Bald Eagle, Bobwhite, Caspian Tern, Royal Tern, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Great-Horned Owl, Chimney Swift, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Kingfisher, Red-headed Woodpecker, Wood-peewee, Acadian Flycatcher, Great-crested Flycatcher, Tree Swallow, Barn Swallow, Marsh Wren, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Wood Thrush, White-eyed Vireo, Red-eyed Vireo, Pine Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, Summer Tanager, Scarlet Tanager, Blue Grosbeak, Indigo Bunting, Field Sparrow.

**Ferry, Hog Island and Chippokes:** Great Egret, Osprey, Bald Eagle, Kestrel, Bobwhite, Black-bellied Plover, Semipalmated Plover, Greater Yellowlegs, Lesser Yellowlegs, Willet, Sanderling, Semipalmated Sandpiper, Western Sandpiper, Least Sandpiper, White-rumped Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper, Stilt Sandpiper, Short-billed Dowitcher, Caspian Tern, Royal Tern, Common Tern, Least Tern, Black Tern (from the Ferry), Chimney Swift, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Wood-peewee, Phoebe, Tree Swallow, Barn Swallow, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, White-eyed Vireo, Red-eyed Vireo, Common Yellowthroat, Blue Grosbeak, Indigo Bunting, Field Sparrow, Orchard Oriole. (Only Chippokes) Wild Turkey, Green-backed Heron, Meadowlark.

**Camp Peary:** Great Egret, Snowy Egret, Green-backed Heron, Osprey, Bald Eagle, Wild Turkey, Bobwhite, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Chimney Swift, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Red-headed Woodpecker, Hairy Woodpecker, Great-crested Flycatcher, Tree Swallow, Barn Swallow, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Wood Thrush, White-eyed Vireo, Red-eyed Vireo, Pine Warbler, Prairie Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, Hooded Warbler, Yellow-breasted Chat, Summer Tanager, Scarlet Tanager, Blue Grosbeak, Indigo Bunting.

**Kingsmill:** Green-backed Heron, Osprey, Bobwhite, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Barred Owl, Chimney Swift, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Phoebe, Great-crested Flycatcher, Tree Swallow,

Barn Swallow, House Wren, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Wood Thrush, Red-eyed Vireo, Pine Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, Summer Tanager, Scarlet Tanager, Blue Grosbeak, Meadowlark.

**Kingswood:** Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Chimney Swift, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Great Crested Flycatcher, House Wren, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Wood Thrush, White-eyed Vireo, Red-eyed Vireo, Redstart.

## **FORCES OF NATURE—Shirley Devan**

Monitoring a bluebird trail is enough to convince anyone of the awesome forces of Mother Nature. The 41 bluebird boxes at York River State Park have provided vivid evidence for club members Dorothy Winfield and Shirley Devan who have been peeking into the boxes almost weekly since February. Some of their observations: It's amazing what a bird can accomplish during a nesting/mating season. Untold times a bluebird or house sparrow had scouted an empty box, built a complete nest and laid three or four eggs in a week's time.

At the end of August 64 bluebirds had fledged from 41 boxes. One box contained four baby birds that hatched sometime between August 18 and 22.

The star box was #5, located in the highest auto traffic area. Two broods yielded nine bluebirds. And the third brood of the season was on the way with three eggs in mid- July when predators (a snake!?) got to the box. Close behind was #26 with eight bluebirds fledged in two broods. Box #26 is a new box this year in a new location.

One must check every box every round and never count one out. One box was empty until the first week in July when bluebirds built a complete nest in a week and then laid five eggs the following week.

Who would have thought bluebirds would choose a purple martin house over a nearby bluebird box. Several times bluebirds were observed going in and out of the purple martin house. We're convinced they have a "high-rise" nest.

The nesting instincts of some bluebirds and house

sparrows began to slow in mid-summer. Several bluebird boxes contained only partial nests for the last several weeks, and several boxes from which house sparrow nests had been removed every week were empty.

One mother house sparrow must have been absent the day they taught her class how to build a nest. Twice she laid her eggs directly on the bottom of the box with just a few grass sprigs around the edges. Others had completely filled their boxes with everything from cellophane to peacock feathers to horsehair. Bluebirds generally use pine needles, perhaps because they are so abundant in the park. How do they make that little cup so perfectly round?

Snakes are hard to deter unless extreme measures are taken in the form of predator baffles. Snakes got into six boxes to snack on baby bluebirds. "Tanglefoot" (the stickiest substance you'll ever get into) will not stop snakes but does work on ants and other creatures that crawl up the pole.

Early in the spring a couple of bluebird nests with eggs showed evidence of house sparrow predation. Later it appeared the two species had reached an equilibrium.

Birding is great at York River State Park. Blue grosbeaks, summer tanagers, common yellowthroats, bobwhite quail, and pileated woodpeckers (among others) were all spotted in mid July, without even trying.

## **BIRD OF THE MONTH**

### **The Horned Lark by Bill Holcombe**

Even on a very good trip to Craney Island you don't get to see everything that is there in one visit. To me, one of the real treasures of Craney Island is the presence of Horned Larks. Unfortunately we did not get to see them on the trip August 15, although Ruth Beck says that they are still there. I've had the good fortune to see them on other trips and I have always found such sightings to be exciting and satisfying treats. On a trip last year as we sat in the car bemoaning the fact that none had been encountered, and suddenly there were two within 15 feet of us. They were in full breeding color with horns up. They walked

and scratched around for a good ten minutes! When I asked Bill Sheehan about local sightings I was surprised to learn that in most years since his records started he has received one or two reports of sightings in our area. Drummonds Field, College Creek and Felsgate Creek on the Parkway, the Airport and fields near the Chickahominy are recurring locations. Hog Island is the most likely local spot listed in the Club's recent publication. However, if you were to set out to see this bird, Craney Island would be the place to go. You may bump into this handsome creature at one of those places between early October and the end of June.

The Horned Lark is our only native representative of the Lark family in the Americas. (The Meadow Lark isn't a Lark at all but a member of the *Troopial* family which includes grackles, orioles, bobolinks, cowbirds, etc.) The Sky Lark was introduced early this century and they exist in scattered pockets in the northwest but efforts in the northeast did not succeed.

Our lark is circumpolar and is widely found in open, bare lands such as deserts, beaches, grasslands, plowed fields, and golf courses. They are found on the Arctic coasts of the northern hemisphere south to northern Africa and in North America in Alaska, Canada and United States south to Baja on the west coast and across the southern states to Georgia. This is a ground loving, eight-inch long bird that walks rather than hop about, has a brown back to the forehead, black tail with white corners and white under parts. The head is particularly interesting. The forehead is black with black whisker marks down the sides of the face. There is a black collar below a pale throat, a yellow face and two black, tufts of feathers, the "horns." Females and immatures are similar but not so vivid. The hind claw is very long and nearly straight, the "larkspur."

Flight is undulating and the wings are folded close to the body after each wing beat. John Terres in the Audubon Encyclopedia describes a courtship flight of the Horned Lark that I'd love to see. The lark silently flies upward in a tight circle until considerable height is achieved, often 800 feet, where it begins a high pitched, tinkling flight song as it circles. At the end of the song it drops head-

long, with wings folded back to earth. Then at the last minute it opens the wings and alights.

Birds may winter in their nesting range or migrate to warmer climates which in U.S. means southern or southeastern areas of United States. Winter flocks may be huge or quite small or mixed with snow buntings or Lapland Longspurs. Most of the birds that nest in Canada or Alaska have left their U.S. wintering grounds by the end of April. For those birds that will nest on their wintering ground, as at Craney Island, the males have chosen territories by February or March. The nest is built by females on open, bare ground in slight hollows that she digs or in natural ones that she finds. She lines this with soft grass and feathers. She lays four gray-green eggs with brown speckles which she incubates for 11-12 days. The young fly 11-12 days later. In northern areas or high altitudes one brood a season is the rule. Where conditions are more favorable two or more may occur. Walking as they forage, these birds eat all sorts of seeds and insects found on the ground.

Reference: *The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds* by John K. Terres

## **ANTING—A BIRD PHENOMENON**

Having just read about this phenomenon for the first time and finding it a fantastic sort of adaptive behavior, I thought perhaps that our members, too, might find it intriguing. "Anting" is an activity of birds in which they deliberately invest themselves with ants. They pluck up the insects and stuff them, dead or alive, in among their feathers. They may also squat above ant hills to permit the ants to crawl into their feathers.

This behavior by birds has been observed worldwide and over 200 species of passerines (perching birds) have been seen doing it. A common early explanation was that the birds are making use of the acid qualities of the ants to rid themselves of lice, mites and other parasites. The hunting instincts of the ants prompt them to remove these vermin from the host and return them to their nests as edibles. A study in 1970, noting that this practice is most frequent during the molting season, concludes that skin irritation caused by the emerging feathers prompts the behavior. The acid quality combined with the

natural preening oils relieves this skin irritation in some manner. Both theories may have some validity.

Twenty four species of ants are known to be used, as are at least forty sorts of substitutes such as beetles, meal worms, orange and lemon fruit, coffee, vinegar, cigarette and cigar butts, sumac berries and other materials that have an acid quality. All of the ants involved contain formic acid.

John Audubon published the first reference to the subject when he wrote in 1831 of watching wild turkeys roll in ant nests to clear their feathers of loose scales and to prevent ticks and other vermin from attacking them — these insects being unable to bear the odor of earth where the ants have been. Ornithologists have been looking at this phenomenon and speculating about it ever since. A survey in 1959 reported that in about a twenty year period 200 reports, articles and books dealt with the subject. Some curious facets had been reported. The survey reports that various writers have referred to it as a puzzle, an enigma, a mystery. There have been expressions of astonishment at the actions of the birds in their efforts to anoint the least accessible parts of their plumage. "These efforts promote ecstasy and often result in behavior clownishly beautiful," or, "the birds wallow or bathe among ants and, while doing so, endure a scarcely bearable irritation."

American studies report grackles anointing their feathers with choke cherries and the juice from the hulls of walnuts. Grackles have also been reported rubbing themselves with mothballs that were placed in gardens to deter rabbits. American birds observed participating in anting include blue jays, catbirds, robins, thrushes, cedar waxwings, bobolinks, orioles, cardinals, grosbeaks and sparrows.

## **HUNTING SEASON AT HOG IS.**

Hunting Season has begun at Hog Island. During September, while birders will be welcome in the Wildlife Management Area on **Sunday, Monday, Wednesday and Friday**, you need a shot gun and a license to enter those areas on **Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday**. We will print the schedule for the rest of the season when we can get it.