



THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

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NEXT MEETING

We next meet on Wednesday, November 18 at 7:30 PM in Room 211 Millington Hall on the William and Mary campus. A program, "Birds of Prey Found in Tidewater," will be presented by Reese Lukei, a volunteer research assistant at the William and Mary Research Center for Conservation Biology. Mr. Lukei also participates in trapping and banding raptors at the National Wildlife Refuge on the Virginia eastern shore not far from Kiptopeke.

Executive Committee !!! Remember to gather in Room 211 at 6:45 for a brief meeting prior to the regular meeting.

NOVEMBER FIELD TRIP INCLUDES COFFEE AT SHEEHAN'S

On Saturday, November 21 persons attending the November Field Trip will assemble at the usual parking place, the C.W. Information Center (right side as you enter) at 7:30 AM. Joy Archer, Bobby Giese and Alex Minarik will lead the group on a tour of Jamestown Island and possibly some of the parkway nearby. The trip will wind up with coffee and snacks in Bill Sheehan's kitchen. Take a peek at the Jamestown field notes this month to get an idea of what birds may be found there. You may add brown creepers, yellow-bellied sapsuckers and ruby-crowned kinglets to that list. They are likely to be seen at either Jamestown Island or in Bill Sheehan's back yard bower. Often there are other totally unexpected surprises at both places.

THE OUTER BANKS IN OCTOBER

I was fortunate to be on Hatteras Island the second week in October. The Pea Island Nature Refuge exhibited a great mix of birds, either arriving or departing, or getting ready to do so. In early morning light the always-exciting snow geese were a brilliant white as they honked their way down onto the surface, spilling air from their wings as they dropped. Lots of ducks were already there. The American widgeon was most prominent and must have counted in the thousands. I also saw lots of black ducks and gadwalls, a few shovelers and lots of pintails. The pintails were tough for me to identify as they were a rather nondescript light gray, dark gray and white duck. It wasn't until I found some of the pintails with the white neck stripe and dark heads mixed in with these that I was willing to agree with a nearby young mother from New York who had quickly labeled them properly! Getting ready to leave for the south land were thousands of black skimmers lined up on a long, distant sand bar and all facing into the rising sun. There were scattered Caspian terns among them. A strangely quiet mass of birds packed closely together turned out to be 70-80 motionless short-billed dowitchers. A moment later a couple of them couldn't stand the stillness any longer and started digging their sewing machine bills downward for breakfast. Accustomed to seeing pied-billed grebes only in scattered ones and twos, it was strange for me to see a group of thirty sticking so closely together. There were also lots of great egrets, little blue herons, a few snowy egrets and quite a few multi-colored herons, plus one group of eight white ibis. Peeps were in evidence but too far away to

identify. They were mixed among lesser yellow-legs. A lovely morning! — By Bill Holcombe

OCTOBER FIELD TRIP

Ten participants enjoyed a fine bird walk at York River State Park on October 24th. Of the 36 species seen, yellow-rumped warblers and blue birds were most abundant. Yellow-bellied sapsuckers were numerous — three or four on a single tree. Other birds sighted were sharp-shinned hawk, kestrel, laughing and great black-backed gulls, belted kingfisher, red-headed woodpecker, red-bellied woodpecker, yellow-bellied sapsucker, flicker, pileated woodpecker, white breasted nuthatch, ruby-crowned kinglet, hermit thrush, brown thrasher, cardinal, towhee, chipping sparrow, swamp sparrow, white-throated sparrow and dark-eyed junco.

Bird walkers in attendance were Marilyn Zeigler, Bettye Fields, Alex & Mike Minarik, Pat and Mike Healy, Charles Rend, Jandy and Randy Strickland (with puppy) and leader, Lee Schuster.

OCTOBER FIELD NOTES

(Residents and very common migrants are not usually listed unless they are recent arrivals or departures)

First reports of white-throated sparrows and juncos were made October 14 from Chippokes and First Colony, with white-throats at Kingswood the next day and juncos at Camp Peary on October 18. A woodcock just made the October report when one burst out of the leaves right in front of Bill Sheehan as he stood in his own famous back yard on the 31st. Joy Archer reported the first yellow-bellied sapsucker of the year and *it was in her back yard*. Cinnamon teal, (see following story) green-winged and blue-winged teal, wood duck, ruddy ducks and gadwalls have joined the widgeon and black ducks reported last month at Hog Island. Ruddy ducks were first reported at Camp Peary on October 18. Coot have appeared at Kingsmill. So far there are no reports of waxwings, creepers, winter wrens or tundra swans. Although an October savannah sparrow was seen at Hog Island, we don't have a date. On the other

side of the ledger, while the migrating song birds are shrinking in number we still have reports of white-eyed vireo, common yellow throat, and parula warblers, wood-pewee and catbird. Tom Armour found a buff-breasted sandpiper at Hog Island on October 25 which is a new "late date" for a bird that is rather rare here at any time of the year. He also found black-bellied and semi-palmated plover there.

Jamestown Island — Great egret, wood duck, black duck, osprey, bald eagle, cooper's hawk (at College Creek), bobwhite, clapper rail, kingfisher, killdeer, red-headed woodpecker, wood-pewee, phoebe, tree swallow, hermit thrush, white-eyed vireo, swamp sparrow, white-throated sparrow, junco, meadowlark.

Ferry and Hog Island — Great egret, mute swan, wood duck, green-winged teal, cinnamon teal, black duck, mallard, blue-winged teal, gadwall, American widgeon, ruddy duck, osprey, bald eagle, northern harrier, sharp-shinned hawk, kestrel, bobwhite, black-bellied plover, semi-palmated plover, killdeer, greater yellowlegs, semi-palmated sandpiper, pectoral sandpiper, buff-breasted sandpiper, Caspian tern, royal tern, great horned owl, kingfisher, wood-pewee, phoebe, tree swallow, brown-headed nuthatch, chipping sparrow, field sparrow, savannah sparrow, white-throated sparrow, junco.

Chippokes — Osprey, bald eagle, northern harrier, kestrel, wild turkey, bobwhite, killdeer, royal tern, kingfisher, wood-pewee, phoebe, tree swallow, chipping sparrow, field sparrow, white-throated sparrow, junco, meadowlark.

Camp Peary — Pied-billed grebe, great egret, mute swan, wood duck, ruddy duck, wild turkey, bald eagle, sharp-shinned hawk, bobwhite, clapper rail, killdeer, lesser yellowlegs, kingfisher, red-headed woodpecker, wood-pewee, phoebe, tree swallow, common yellowthroat, brown-headed nuthatch, ruby-crowned kinglet, chipping sparrow, white-throated sparrow, junco, meadowlark.

Kingsmill — Pied-billed grebe, great egret, mute swan, wood duck, ruddy duck, osprey, sharp-shinned hawk, Cooper's hawk, coot, killdeer, Caspian tern, royal tern, forster's tern, barred owl, kingfisher, white-throated sparrow, meadowlark.

Kingswood — Red-shouldered hawk, woodcock, wood-pewee, phoebe, ruby-crowned kinglet, hermit thrush, white-throated sparrow, junco.

nominations may be made from the floor at the November meeting. They should have prior permission of the nominee.

A CINNAMON TEAL FIRST

Tony Costello and Mack Walls, who manage the Hog Island Wildlife Refuge, called Bill Sheehan on October 16 to report six male cinnamon teal in the midst of a flock of green-winged teal. They may have been making local birding history, as there are no prior records for this area nor any accepted records in Virginia. Tom Armour went over to support the claim the next day and says that he “probably saw one of the birds.” Later that day Brian Taber went to Hog Island and made a positive identification of one. Brian is investigating with Tony Costello, the processing of a bird sighting-claim with the Virginia Society of Ornithology. Brian, who serves on the VSO Board that investigates such claims, says that “the real question is deciding whether you are dealing with a wild, migrating bird or some escapee from an exotic bird breeder.”

Two years ago Brian and Bill Williams saw a shiny cowbird, the first in this area. They initiated a claim now accepted as a valid first sighting.

NOMINATING COMMITTEE COMPLETES 1999 SLATE

Julie Hotchkiss chaired the Nominating Committee which also included Grace Doyle and Peg Smith. They chose an excellent slate of members who are proposed to do the work of the club in 1999. The slate will be offered for election at the November meeting. The Nominees are:

President.....Joy Archer
Vice Pres. & Program Dir.....Dan Cristol
Vice Pres. & Flyer editor.....Phil Young
Vice Pres. & Flyer editor.....Bill Holcombe
Treasurer.....Charles Rend
Secretary.....Phylis Jennings
Board Member at Large.....Mike Healy
Board Member at Large.....Jandy Strickland

Alex Minarik has accepted the responsibility of arranging the monthly field trips in 1999. If others are interested doing these jobs next year, more

THOM BLAIR IN NEWSWEEK

For long time members of the Bird Club who might have wondered about the picture in the November 9 Newsweek magazine, yes, that picture is of *our* Thom Blair, former president of the Williamsburg Bird Club. Thom has moved from his Florida retirement to the Colonnades Retirement Community in Charlottesville near his alma mater, University of Virginia. The story is about alumni choosing retirement living near the colleges of their youth. If you didn't see it, it is a good picture of a dapper Thom Blair sporting a UVA cap.

1999 CLUB SCHOLARSHIP

Karen Johnson, second year graduate student in the Department of Biology at William and Mary has received the Club's 1999 scholarship grant of \$500. Karen will use the money in her study, “Determination of Spring Departure Dates in White Throat Sparrows.” Dan Cristol is Karen's Graduate Study Advisor. The announcement of the winners in last month's *Flyer* was in error.

OCTOBER MEETING POSTSCRIPT

We thought that those of you who heard Teeta Kane's talk about the Dragon Run preservation work would like to know that she donated her \$50 speaking fee to that worthy project.

NEW MEMBERS

Barbara Phieffer and Suzanne Steinke of “A” Lane Place Drive, Williamsburg, joined the Bird Club recently. Welcome ladies!

BIRD OF THE MONTH

The Belted Kingfisher

With all of the creeks, rivers, ponds and lakes in our area, the belted kingfisher is a pretty common bird in the Williamsburg area. But while it may be commonly found its story is as fascinating as the rarest of our visitors.

The kingfisher family is made up of 86 species, found just about everywhere on earth except for the polar regions. The majority of the kingfisher family found in the old world do not fish, but rather have adapted to woodland life and a diet of insects and seeds. Our belted kingfisher is a true fisher. It is found throughout Canada and the United States and is the only kind of kingfisher found north of Texas.

But when you've seen this bird waiting motionless on a branch above a stream for his dinner of small fish to appear, would you have guessed that:

- This bird builds a nest at the end of a 3 to 7-foot or longer tunnel which the nesting pair digs into the side of a stream bank or any other bank that appeals?
- The female is one of the few North American birds more colorful than the male?
- The birds may dive under water to avoid attacks by falcons and hawks?

The Greek species name is *alcyon*, who, in Greek mythology was daughter of the god of the wind. She and her husband were transformed into kingfishers. The more we learn about even such common birds as this, the more character that they take on.

There is also character in this bird's appearance. The long heavy bill on the large blue-gray head topped with a conspicuous crest contrasts with the small body, short tail and tiny feet. These features give the bird a top heavy appearance. The birds are blue-gray above with a white collar and broad band of blue-gray across the breast. Both sexes have the ragged double crest and are white below but the female has a chestnut band across the belly and rufous flanks. The birds are usually solitary except during the nesting season. When flying along streams or pond edges it frequently utters a loud, rattling call that somehow matches its appearance and has been translated to *rickety*,

crick, crick crick. It winters over in much of its nesting range but requires open water for survival.

When feeding, the kingfisher can seize prey off the surface, from shallow water or may dive below the surface. It returns to its perch where it beats the prey on the limb, tosses it into the air and then swallows it head first. Along with fish it eats large tadpoles, crabs, crayfish, clams, oysters and lizards. It varies this diet with insects, young birds and berries. It disgorges pellets of bones, scales and other indigestible parts of fish.

In spring nesting pairs build the nests together. Using the heavy bill and feet they dig a slightly up-slanting tunnel 3 to 4 inches wide and 3 to 7 feet deep (some have been found as deep as 15 feet) in sand, clay or gravel banks on the shore of a body of water or farther inland. Railroad embankments or other such exposed surfaces have been used. The soil is loosened with the bill and pushed out with the feet. This chore can take from three days to three weeks, depending upon the condition of the soil and the length of the tunnel. The tunnel is unlined except for the nest area which is lined with clean white fish bones, scales and pellets. They also have been known to nest in tree cavities and hollow stumps. Between April and July six or seven white eggs are laid. Incubation time is 23 to 24 days. The age at which the young leave the nest has not been established. No age data are given either, which would indicate that there has been little banding of this bird. Its life style must make study difficult.

So the next time that you see this chunky bird sitting on a limb or flying up a stream remember that its fame extends back at least to the ancient Greeks and that it has carved its own unique place among our bird life histories. — Bill Holcombe

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

CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

On Sunday, December 20 the Williamsburg Bird Club will participate in the 99th Annual Audubon Christmas Bird Count, having done so each year since 1977. Back in 1899 the Audubon Society started the Christmas Count to counter a popular but rather odious practice of hunters taking to the field just before Christmas to see how much game

they could kill in one day. It now includes counts from all over Canada, the U.S., Central and South America and some Caribbean islands. Along with the less promoted and less known Spring Count it has become a significant barometer of changes in bird numbers and locations.

Our assigned count area is roughly a 15-mile diameter circle centered on the C.W. Information Center. The area is divided into nine parts. These can be clearly marked off on maps but here are their approximate settings:

1. **Camp Peary** includes the entire Camp.
2. **Cheatham Annex** includes the entire post.
3. **College Woods** starts on the north side of Colonial Parkway between Jamestown Road and Treasure Island. It includes areas along Jamestown Road, the College Campus and Colonial Williamsburg over to Route 64.
4. **Hog Island** includes the Ferry and the Hog Island Refuge.
5. **Jamestown Island** includes the Island and the Colonial Parkway to College Creek, plus the Vineyards.
6. **Jolly Pond** runs from Route 5 along Centerville Road to Route 60 and includes the Pond, Bush Neck Road, the Scout Reservation and Little Creek Reservoir.
7. **Kingsmill** includes Williamsburg Airport, Kingspoint, Kingsmill, the Country Road and Carter's Grove.
8. **Middle Plantation** is a rather broad sweep across the Peninsula from the James River between Governor's Land and Drummond's Field and over to Route 60.
9. **Skimino** borders Route 60 from Airport Road to Toano and sweeps northeast to the York River.

In almost every case each area has an experienced birder who is familiar with the area. He or she is accompanied by two to four others who have become addicted to this count. The more eyes and ears, the better the count. All club members have a sincere invitation to participate. If you want to go, call the coordinator, Bill Holcombe at 229-8057. You can sign up for the whole day or for a half day, if that is better for you. To be included in the count the Audubon Society requires a \$5 participation fee which is intended to offset the

Society's expense of promoting and recording the event. As this event starts early in the morning, it can be quite cold at the start. You should come dressed for that and bring along lunch and something to drink. You don't have to carry everything with you, as we work from cars and return to them for lunch. In many cases we will move from place to place by car every couple of hours.