



# THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

Volume 22, Number 11

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## NEXT MEETING

We meet next on January 20, our usual third Wednesday of the month, at 7:30 PM in Millington Hall. It is not certain yet whether we return to room 117 or continue in room 211 but the January *Flyer* will have the answer. This month's field trip will be the 1998 Audubon Christmas Bird Count on Sunday, December 20.

## SUNDAY, DECEMBER 20 — AUDUBON CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

Here is the list of the nine territories that we cover for the Christmas Bird count with the names and telephone numbers of the leaders who will guide the coverage. If you want to join in this biggest day of birding in North America, pick an area, give that leader a call and you will learn where to meet and when. (Please **do not** call Tom Armour about Camp Peary, as admission to this post requires specific invitations.)

Camp Peary — Tom Armour  
Cheatham Annex — Bill Williams 229-6095  
College Woods — Ruth Beck 566-8234  
Hog Island — Brian Taber 253-1181  
Jamestown Island — Dot Silsby 596-3252  
Jolly Pond — Dave and Lee Schuster 565-6148  
Kingsmill — Carol and Paul McAllister 229-1323  
Middle Plantation — Hugh Beard 221-0499  
Skimino — Bettye Fields 930-0177

What should you expect? Starting time in the field is usually 7 AM and the search goes on 'til 3:30 or 4:00 with time for an in-field lunch break. Some areas like Hog Island involve a great deal of walking. Others, like the Jolly Pond effort, are

done largely by car with frequent stops. Kingsmill and Middle Plantation involve shifting from area to area by car but with lots of field time at different locations.

You need to bring lunch and something to drink. Despite our recent warm weather, early mornings in December can be very cold and you should plan a layered approach for your clothing selection. Extra clothes and lunch can be left in cars.

This is a broad effort with serious objectives and while repeat participants truly love this event, watching and listening is far more important than social chatter which can be disruptive. You are welcome to come to the 5 PM meeting in Millington Hall where the results are tallied but you need not feel obliged to do so.

## JOY ARCHER, BOBBY GIESE AND ALEX MINARIK LEAD NOVEMBER FIELD TRIP

Joy Archer, Alex Minarik and Bobby Giese and a company of twelve additional birders enjoyed a successful outing on November 21 to the Colonial Parkway and Jamestown Island. The trip ended with a very special opportunity to observe birds in Bill Sheehan's back yard.

Some species were seen in more than one location. Northern flickers and red-winged blackbirds were seen on the parkway and at Jamestown Island. White-throated sparrows, yellow-bellied sapsuckers, white-breasted nuthatches and towhees were seen at Jamestown Island and in Bill's back yard. Other species seen along the Parkway included an immature bald eagle, a hairy woodpecker, American crows, bluebirds, Canada geese, mallards, and red-bellied woodpeckers.

Additional Jamestown Island species included belted kingfisher, fish crow, red-tailed hawk, mockingbirds, bluejays, yellow-rumped warblers, red-headed woodpeckers, robins, black ducks, song sparrows, cardinals, swamp sparrows and hooded mergansers.

The highlight of the day was the very warm welcome extended by Bill Sheehan to share his wonderful backyard bird habitat from his warm homey kitchen. We sat there drinking coffee and eating doughnuts and watched ruby-crowned kinglets, carolina wrens, chickadees and the birds mentioned above, eating at Bill's feeders and scratching through his shrubs.

Participants included Tom Armour, Sam Diao, Pat and Mike Healy, Cynthia Long, Carolyn Lowe, Barbara Phieffer, Jean and Chuck Rend, Suzanne Steinke and Marilyn Zeigler.

*By Bobbie Giese*

## **BURDOCK WEEDS SNAG HUMMINGBIRDS IN D.C.'S ROCK CREEK PARK**

*(Bill Sheehan found this in Science News, Vol. 154)*

Four Ruby-throated hummingbirds, migrating through Washington, D.C.'s Rock Creek Park, became snagged on the sticky burrs of the common burdock weed. Three birds were fatally snagged and one was rescued by jogging birders.

Burdock burrs are those round, green or brown things with all of the little fingers that can stick to your clothing and even your shoes when tramping in fall woods. Any moving thing brushing into the weed inevitably carries off its cleverly adapted seed, leaving it to grow at a new location.

Apparently, the hummingbirds were not strong enough to wrest the burrs free from the plants. Their struggles to do so only snagged them further on additional burrs. "This is nature's Velcro," says Bob Ford, National Park Service biologist at Rock Creek Park.

Though burdock's bird-snaring abilities have garnered little attention over the years, Martin K. McNicholl, a consulting ornithologist based in Burnaby, British Columbia, has accumulated a growing rap sheet on the plant, culled largely

from reports in small, regional journals. They indicate this weed sporadically claims the lives of small birds and even brown bats.

## **FIELD NOTES FOR NOVEMBER**

*(Permanent residents and very common migrating birds are not always listed.)*

As you will see, during November *all* of our usual winter resident waterfowl could be found on either the York or the James River. The York was the best place to see the most birds and the most species. The red-throated loon seen frequently near Yorktown last year has not yet been reported but just about everything else has been, with a couple of notables to spice the report. (Joe Doyle not only saw common loons on the York River but actually heard them singing during the first few days of December. Must have been that hot weather!) Snow geese are not very common in our area but were seen at Hog Island. And a few common mergansers were seen among the ruddy ducks on the James just below the Chippokes bluffs. A black-crowned night heron was spotted not far from the left side of the road at Hog Island. And our winter song birds continue to arrive. A brown creeper was seen at Jamestown Island. A fox sparrow was reported by Brian Taber in Kingswood and a savannah sparrow was seen at Hog Island. Yellow-bellied sapsuckers and hermit thrushes were widely reported. However, there are no cedar waxwings in this month's report and none of the northern finches have shown up yet. Purple finches, red-breasted nuthatches, pine siskins and evening grosbeaks are still missing.

**Jamestown Island and Nearby Parkway:** great egret, wood duck, black duck, ring-necked duck, hooded merganser, bald eagle, cooper's hawk, sharp-shinned hawk, clapper rail, king rail, common snipe, great horned owl, kingfisher, red-headed woodpecker, yellow-bellied sapsucker, brown-headed nuthatch, brown creeper, hermit thrush, swamp sparrow.

**Hog Island, Chippokes and Ferry:** great egret, black-crowned night heron, tundra swan, mute swan, snow goose, green-winged teal, black duck, American widgeon, lesser scaup, common merganser, red-breasted merganser, ruddy duck, bald eagle, northern harrier, sharp-shinned hawk.

kestrel, bob white, black-bellied plover, lesser golden plover, greater yellowlegs, dunlin, bonaparte's gull, Forster's tern, great Horned owl, belted kingfisher, phoebe, brown-headed nuthatch, savannah sparrow, swamp sparrow, meadowlark.

**Camp Peary:** common loon, great egret, tundra swan, mute swan, green-winged teal, black duck, pintail, blue-winged teal, gadwall, American widgeon, canvasback, ring-necked duck, lesser scaup, goldeneye, bufflehead, ruddy duck, bald eagle, kestrel, yellow-bellied sapsucker, brown-headed nuthatch.

**York River State Park:** red-headed woodpecker, yellow-bellied sapsucker, hermit thrush, swamp sparrow.

**Kingsmill:** pied-billed grebe, great egret, mute swan, ring-necked duck, hooded merganser, ruddy duck, cooper's hawk, sharp-shinned hawk, kestrel, coot, killdeer, great horned owl, barred owl, kingfisher, yellow-bellied sapsucker, ruby-crowned kinglet.

**Kingswood:** barred owl, ruby-crowned kinglet, hermit thrush, pine warbler, fox sparrow.

## WINTER ON THE BAY-BRIDGE TUNNEL

*(Brian Taber offers this reminder for some special winter birding.)*

The Bay Bridge Tunnel's unique location provides an opportunity for some very special winter birding. These opportunities are at their best when the weather is at its worst, as this drives sea birds to seek shelter and discourages sport fishing boats from chugging around the islands and scaring off birds seeking that shelter. During December and January of last year king eider, common eider and old squaw ducks were seen. Scoters are not uncommon and storms can bring in other winter sea birds not usually observed from the shore. Get some friends to share the tunnel expense and give it a try sometime when high winds are expected or a northeaster is blowing along the coast.

You can enter the Bay-Bridge Tunnel and return without passing through the northern toll booth for the payment of one \$10:00 fee. Bathroom facilities are located on the southernmost island.

You can obtain a birding letter to stop at each of the islands that are open by calling 757-331-2960 or by writing to: Clement M. Pruitt, Director of Operations, Chesapeake Bay-Bridge Tunnel District, P.O. Box 111, Cape Charles, VA 23310-0111. Construction is going on now and visitors on any particular day may be barred from one or all of the islands except for the first or southernmost. You can phone to find the status.

## YOU, TOO, CAN PARTICIPATE IN THE FEEDER-WATCH PROGRAM

*(There are two Feeder-Watch Programs being discussed right now. This program asks for a report every two weeks from November through March and is operated by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.) The other is a once-a-year program which occurs in February that we will detail in the January Flyer.*

The Cornell Lab of Ornithology invites you to participate with thousands of other birders in an eleven year old program to monitor winter birds at backyard feeders once every two weeks from November through March. You don't have to wait until next November but can start the program now. You list the species of birds at your feeders and the numbers seen during the course of a day and report the results every two weeks to the Lab either by mail or by computer web site. Their pamphlet says, "Spend as little or as much time as you can."

The processed data reveal both long-term changes in populations over time and periodic shifts. For instance, our locally increased number of red-breasted nuthatch reports last winter matches a cyclical two year spike in the invasion of these birds from northern climes, as calculated by the Feeder-Watch Program. Evening grosbeaks and common redpolls follow the same pattern.

There is a \$15 fee which pays for the program. You can enroll by calling 1-800-843-BIRD or by writing a request to enroll listing your name and address and enclosing a check for \$15.00 to:

Project Feeder Watch/BC2  
Cornell Lab of Ornithology  
P.O. Box 11  
Ithaca, NY 14851-0011

## **WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB JOINS PARTNERS IN FLIGHT**

The membership approved the motion requested by President Joy Archer to join The Partners in Flight program and the commitment has been filed. There is no financial obligation associated with this membership but the commitment is listed in the memorandum of agreement which makes our membership official. It says:

*“Recognizing the importance of conserving avian diversity in the Western Hemisphere, Williamsburg Bird Club, agrees to help maintain healthy bird populations through participation in PARTNERS IN FLIGHT and acknowledges that the following fundamental principles are critical to effective bird conservation:*

*Conservation of birds depends upon the close coordination of the diverse skills and resources of private and public landowners, government agencies, businesses, private and public institutions and all citizens who care for wildlife;*

*Enveloped in effective bird conservation is a multitude of discreet activities, including research, management, outreach and education, and monitoring;*

*Sound conservation includes not only concern for and wise management of birds and other wildlife, but also a fair vision for social and economic development that includes consideration of the need and views of all stakeholders;*

*Bird conservation requires consideration of both bird populations and the habitats that support them;*

*Sound conservation must be based upon sound science;*

*Bird conservation requires a year-round perspective on breeding grounds, migration sites and wintering areas.”*

Along with many local organizations such as ours some of the national and international organizations committed to these principles are The American Bird Conservancy, American Forest and Paper Association, American Ornithologists Union, Conservation International, Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, Earth Foundation, Hawk Migration Association of North America, Institute for Bird Population, National

Association of State Foresters, National Audubon Society, National Wildlife Association, Nature Conservancy, The Wilderness Society, and World Wildlife Fund.

## **AUDUBON NEWS RELEASES**

The National Audubon Association has started a new communications program of supplying E-mail releases to Bird Club newsletters. Nineteen pages of material arrived recently and I'll try to pass on highlights of the most interesting articles.

**Shade Grown Coffee Program** — Many of our tropical migrants have for many years spent winters in the tree canopies of coffee plantations in Central and South America. Historically, coffee has been grown there on relatively small, family-run plantations. Fruit and nut trees, which supplied an alternate crop and the shade needed for growing coffee, also supplied a winter home for tropical migrants nesting in North America. These family enterprises are now being replaced by large corporate operations. The shade trees have been eliminated in favor of fabric or plastic screening and in some cases by certain coffee plants that can withstand the sun. There is a growing movement among environmentalists and birders to ask for identification of natural shade grown coffee and to purchase only this type.

**Environmental Victory in Alaska** — One of the most serious threats to America's scenic wilderness since the system was created in 1964 has been averted," said John Flicker, President of the American Audubon Society. He was referring to the congressional rejection of a road proposed, allegedly, to solve a medical emergency problem of a small Alaskan community. The alternative solution does not sound perfect but it solves the problem without the thirty mile road through the Izembeck Wilderness area.

**Ohio Gets Statewide Audubon Organization** — Using the strength of its twenty local chapters and 22,000 Ohio members, National Audubon Society/Ohio will devote itself to the conservation of habitat for birds and other wildlife. Audubon Ohio will launch major initiatives, including the important Bird Areas conservation program and a system of nature education centers. Audubon's approach to nature conservation is science-based

and solution-oriented, according to the new Executive Director, Steven Sedam. Ohio is the 19<sup>th</sup> state office created by the Audubon Society.

**Conserving Favorite Birding Spots** — Audubon is calling upon conservationists and birdwatchers to nominate favorite birding spots for recognition as Important Bird Areas (IBA). The Audubon IBA program is a comprehensive effort to identify and protect habitats critical to bird survival. Identified IBA site candidates should be submitted on IBA discovery forms available on the Fall Fly Away site, <[www.audubon.org/campaign/ff98](http://www.audubon.org/campaign/ff98)>.

## BIRD OF THE MONTH

### Sharp-shinned Hawk

In North America there are 26 species in the hawk family. Of these four are eagles, five are kites and 17 are species of hawks. From a classification standpoint, eagles are just very large hawks. The bald eagle, our largest, is up to 43 inches long. At the other end of the size range is the sharp-shinned hawk, measuring up to 14 inches long and weighing only up to eight ounces. The 17 hawk species are divided into *buteos* and *accipiters*. The *buteos* have strong, heavy bodies with fan shaped tails and broad soaring wings, whereas *accipiters* have more streamlined bodies, shorter, rounded wings and longer tails, helpful in quick turning and darting maneuvers. The sharp-shinned hawk is an *accipiter* that is fast enough and maneuverable enough to catch prey in flight. It is built to dart quickly through forested areas. In fact, its quick, darting flight often makes it difficult to be sure just what you have seen when this bird flashes around the corner of the house and into the trees, grasping a feeder bird as it goes.

As in most hawk families, the female, while very similar in appearance, is distinctly larger than the male. Both have slim bodies that are blue-gray above, white below and have heavily cross barring of red-brown on the breast. The feet are long and bright yellow. The longish tail is square or slightly forked with a white tip and three or four narrow bands of black. It nests north to the tree line in Canada and winters mostly south of the Canadian border, with a large belt of permanent residents starting from southern portions of Canada and dipping south to Georgia and

Alabama. There is considerable spring and fall migration.

This is a fierce, bold hunter that beats low over the ground, darting under branches and through wooded openings or making its way through bushy fields. Then it suddenly drops to the ground to grasp prey, or makes a sudden change of direction to snatch the prey from a branch or a bird feeder. It then continues its flight carrying the victim in its sharp talons. While obviously not a favorite of many backyard bird feeders, studies have shown that this hawk's diet of smaller birds is not a threat to the health of the total population. In fact, it has been known to attack prey larger than itself such as pileated woodpeckers and rock doves. These birds also eat mice, shrews, bats, frogs, grasshoppers and moths.

New nests are usually built each year of sticks, twigs and strips of bark attached to the crotch of a tree close to the trunk. Four or five eggs, white blotched with brown, are laid from March to July and are incubated by both adults for about 35 days. The young are ready to fly about 23 days after hatching. Banded birds have been found as old as twelve years. Their flight speeds have been clocked at 28 mph.

Our Club Annotated List calls the sharp-shinned hawk a common migrant, yet it is difficult to say just where you are most likely to see this bird. They are reported from Chippokes and Jamestown Island/Parkway with some frequency and I have seen them in my back yard, but fortunately, not too often.

Bill Holcombe