



THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

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NEXT MEETING

We next meet Wednesday, February 17 at 7:30 PM in Room 211 at Millington Hall, William and Mary Campus. The program will be presented by Gary Costanza, a speaker whom many of us have been hoping would return. He conducted a wonderful survey of our local water fowl birds and sites a few years back. Mr. Costanza is the water fowl project leader for the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries. His program will be based on several years of research on the life cycles of wood ducks and Canada geese.

FEBRUARY FIELD TRIP

On Saturday, February 20, Bill Williams will lead a field trip to Cheatham Annex. Don't miss out on an opportunity to bird this restricted area. Two months ago during the Christmas Bird Count this area produced common loons, pied-billed and horned grebes, tundra swans, eleven species of water fowl, clapper rails, an American bittern, woodcocks, brown-headed nuthatches, house and winter wrens, a catbird, a parula warbler and a savannah sparrow. In fact, eighty of the 112 species seen on the 1998 Christmas Bird Count were seen at Cheatham Annex.

We will depart from Colonial Williamsburg's Visitor Center parking lot (right side as you enter) at 7:30 AM and return by 12 o'clock noon.

Get out and Count!

HOW TO RECORD YOUR BACK YARD BIRD COUNT FEB. 19-22

The National Audubon Society and the Cornell

Ornithology Lab hope that the Great Back Yard Bird Count of 1999 will involve more observers and counters than ever before participated in such a project. The results ought to be a bench mark study of species and their whereabouts just before spring migration begins. They have made it extremely easy for us all to participate. There is no fee or registration — just observing, counting and reporting. The Great Back Yard Bird Count web site says:

“Here's what you do: On the day(s) that you count, watch your bird feeders or take a short walk in your neighborhood or park. For each kind (species) of bird you see, keep track of the highest number of individuals you observe at one time. Use the new region-specific Great Backyard Bird Count form to submit your highest counts for each day.” That form comes up on the website and you type in the numbers next to the species observed. You make a separate report each day. We will have the list available for distribution at the February meeting but you really do not need the list to do your observing and counting.

When your report is entered into the web site at <<http://birdsource.cornell.edu>> you will be asked to provide this information: observation date - postal code - observer e-mail address - start time - duration. The observer rates his or her ability to identify all species present (fair, good or excellent); weather conditions (fair, good, or excellent); and habitats observed, checking all that apply (deciduous woods, grassland, suburban, salt water, coniferous woods, agricultural, urban, scrub, rural, freshwater).

If you are going to file your own report on a computer you will be happy to know this program is very user friendly. After answering the above

questions you click your way down the list and enter a number in a box next to all of the species that you observed. If you are going to take your lists, one per day, to Wild Birds Unlimited or give them to Bill Holcombe or some other friendly computer owner, please enter all of the preliminary information on each list. The only confusing thing that I see is that you might observe for two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon, although there is room for only one starting time. I assume you use the first starting time of the day and report the total number of hours or minutes you spent observing.

Remember that unlike some listing programs where the researchers seek data on varied and interesting birds, in this study they are just as interested in grackles as they are in fox sparrows. They are interested in what you can factually report seeing each day for the four days involved. Please DO NOT combine the observations of one day with another. Please DO NOT add up all of a species seen over the period of your observation; rather, use only the single greatest number that you saw at one time on a given day. Also remember that the self-rating of your competence is based upon your ability to recognize the species that are in your neighborhood during February.

This is an important project, one to which every person interested in birds can contribute. Get *your* juncos and *your* chickadees and *your* carolina wrens and all of those other birds that *you* feed into this count!

If you want me to file your report, mail it to me at 4705 Lady Slipper Path, Williamsburg, VA 23188 or drop it off in my newspaper tube. Anyone with access to the internet will find that the filing is easy and straightforward. Just give them the internet address provided above. You can also take your reports to Wild Birds Unlimited. — Bill Holcombe

BIRD CLUB KEEPS WJCC LIBRARY BOOKS UP-TO-DATE

The Williamsburg-James City County Library bought seven books in 1998 with funds provided by the Williamsburg Bird Club. This activity is an annual exercise of the Club's purpose as stated in the constitution, "The purpose of this club is to

promote interest in the study of wild birds and in the protection of birds and their habitat."

The seven new titles are: "America's 100 Most Wanted Birds," "Jeffrey Whiting's Owls of North America," "More Birding by Ear," "Vanishing Songbirds," "The Sixth Order: Wood Warblers and Other Passerine Birds," "The American Bird Conservancy Guide to All the Birds of North America," "Everything You Need To Know About Birding and Backyard Attraction," "Book of North American Birds."

The total cost of these books was \$126.59. Alice Springe coordinates this project for the club.

A PICTURE PERFECT DAY

"The weather is great! Wish you were here." This was the unanimous sentiment of the nine lucky Bird Club members who went on the January field trip to Newport News Park. The lighting was perfect for good views of the eight water fowl species counted on the reservoir. And the woodpeckers were out in force, including a red-headed, a hairy and a very industrious pileated. A total of 42 species was seen by Tom Armour, the trip leader, and the following participants: Tom Ellis & Ann Moore, Cynthia Long, Alex and Mike Minarik, Chuck Rend, Randy Strickland and Marilyn Zeigler.

BIRD OF THE MONTH

Great Egret

Most of us find the great egret to be a rather satisfying bird to spot when out in the field although it certainly is not a rare bird along the shores of creeks and ponds in our area. But it is a bird with presence. It stands majestically and moves gracefully.

The great egret is a member of the heron family, which includes herons, egrets and bitterns, and has a close relationship to the storks, ibises and flamingoes. There are 63 heron species world wide and 15 of these can claim North American residence. That includes the newest arrival of this group, the cattle egret, which brought itself here from Africa by flying across the ocean to South America in the late 19th century. It did not arrive in the United States until 1941 when it reached

Florida.

The name separation of the egrets from the herons is due to the beautiful nuptial plumage adorning the egrets. These long filamentous plumes on the back, lower fore neck or head of egrets create the distinction. The great egret's plumes are on the back. They begin growing on both sexes in January, become a gorgeous cape of fifty or so plumes and then disappear by summer. They are the source of the bird's Greek species name, *kosmetos herodios*, or adorned heron.

This tall, 37 to 42 inches, all-white bird with no seasonal color changes has a long, heavy, sharply pointed, yellow bill and long yellow legs. While the snowy egret cousin is in some ways similar, it is quite a bit smaller and its black bill, black legs and skinny yellow feet make a clear distinction. This wading bird is found along the shores of streams, lakes, ponds and both fresh and salt water marshes in most parts of the U.S. In the East it nests from the Southeastern states north to the Great Lakes and along the Atlantic coast to Maine. It winters across the southern tier of states and up the Atlantic Coast to North Carolina. While it is rarely seen in the winter months in our area, a few stragglers appear year round. However, there are few reports of nesting in this area.

When feeding, the great egret stalks slowly through shallow water until prey is spotted. Then the long neck and bill shoot out and the prey is grasped in the beak. It is usually swallowed whole. The undigested parts are expelled in pellets. This is an ecologically sophisticated bird that leaves the water to defecate. Food includes fishes, frogs, salamanders, snakes, crayfish, mice, crickets, grasshoppers, etc. In flight, like all herons, this bird flies with its legs straight back and its long neck tucked into an S-shaped curve. The wing motion is rather slow and deliberate.

Terres, in his discussion of herons that can light upon the water and swim, does not specifically mention the great egret. However, the fact that he does assign this observed behavior to great blue herons, night herons, little bitterns, avocets and stilts would make it seem possible that the great heron might also have this ability. I certainly have never seen it, but the thought of seeing a great egret settling on the surface and swimming about somehow seems pretty exciting.

Nesting may be done singly or in colonies and the colonies may include other herons, storks, ibises or cormorants. Nests are usually 20 to 40 feet above ground but they are sometimes assembled in bull rushes or cattails within a few feet of the water. Usually three or four eggs are laid as early as January in Florida and then progressively later until an April to July range in Maine. Incubation time is about 24 days and first flight follows in about 42 days.

Age records range from an eight year old captive at the Washington National Zoo to 22 years for a banded bird shot in Ohio.

The darkest period in this bird's history started at about 1840 when the nuptial plumes were sought after for decorations on women's hats. By 1903 the trade was offering \$32 an ounce for these decorations and the egrets reached their lowest U.S. numbers. Reaction against this slaughter finally set in through the efforts of the Audubon Society and by 1917 the populations started to recover. Strict protection of rookeries continues today.

These birds can be seen on the edges of almost any body of water in our area but are most often seen during the milder months at Hog Island, Jamestown Island and ponds and inlets along the Colonial Parkway.

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

FIELD NOTES FOR JANUARY

(Resident and very common transient birds are not usually reported.)

Despite January's volatile up and down temperatures, we did have some notable bird reports in January. **Alex Minarik** had two **water pipits** at Lake Toano. Hog Island ranger, **Tony Costillo** saw a mix of five white-phase and blue-phase **snow geese** mixed in with a very large Canada goose population. **Tom Armour** saw a **red-throated loon** off the Kingsmill Marina. A very early or hold-over **osprey** was seen at Lake Toano by **Pat Sgrinia**. On a warm day in late January **John McDowell** and **Bill Holcombe** saw an apparently exhausted, non-moving group of 40 **killdeer** huddled along the Powhatan Creek Pond

at the entrance to Jamestown Island. Then, leaving the island where you can look across the marsh bordering Powhatan Creek, they saw a group of about 40 **great egrets** perched in a tree on the far side of the creek. On a very cold, windy January 10, Bill also saw a huddled mass of 40 to 50 **avocets** at the Pea Island Nature Preserve on Hatteras Island. **Tom Armour and Bill Sheehan** saw an unusual concentration of 8 or 9 thousand **ruddy ducks** in the James River off Kiptopeke State Park. Could this be the concentration usually seen in the York River off Felsgate Creek, where they were counted in just tens and twenties in late January? And Holcombe saw a **red-shouldered hawk** grab a piece of meat from **Bill Sheehan's** hawk feeder! Still very scarce are the **purple finches** (one female by Tom Armour), no **evening grosbeaks**, no **pine siskins**, no **red-breasted nuthatches**, no **winter wrens** and one **brown creeper** (Bill Sheehan). Happily, our winter visiting **cedar waxwings**, **white-throated sparrows** and **juncos** are all over the place and **hermit thrushes** were widely seen.

Jamestown Island and Nearby Parkway: mute swan, hooded merganser, red-breasted merganser, ruddy duck, ruby-crowned kinglet, savannah sparrow, swamp sparrow, white-throated sparrow, junco.

Hog Island, Ferry and Chippokes: great egret, snow goose, lesser scaup, hooded merganser, red-breasted merganser, ruddy duck, black vulture, kestrel (Chippokes), savannah sparrow, swamp sparrow, junco.

Kingsmill: red-throated loon, pied-billed grebe, great egret, pintail duck, ring-necked duck, lesser scaup, hooded merganser, red-bellied merganser, ruddy duck, coot, Bonaparte's gull, junco, purple

finch.

Kingswood: mute swan, hooded merganser, sharp-shinned hawk, cooper's hawk, ruby-crowned kinglet, savannah sparrow.

Camp Peary: killdeer, kingfisher, red-headed and red-bellied woodpeckers, flicker, pileated woodpecker, white-breasted nuthatch, golden and ruby-crowned kinglets, cedar waxwing, pine warbler, goldeneye, bufflehead, ruddy duck, wood duck, canvasback, ringneck duck, tundra and mute swans, hooded merganser, bald eagle, red-shouldered and red-tailed hawks, kestrel, wild turkey, bobwhite, coot, song sparrow, swamp sparrow, white-throated sparrow, meadowlark, loon, pied-billed grebe, shoveler.

York River-Yorktown: common loon, horned grebe, tundra swan, mute swan, American widgeon, canvasback, lesser scaup, goldeneye, bufflehead, hooded merganser, red-breasted merganser, ruddy duck, ruby-crowned kinglet.

1998 DONATIONS

Here's a rundown on the Williamsburg Bird Club's charitable donations during the past year:

William & Mary Student grant	— \$500
Williamsburg Regional Library	— \$125
Virginia Society of Ornithology	— \$75
Nature Conservancy	— \$50
Toano Middle School	
Feeder Watch Program	— \$50
K.E.S.T.R.E.L.	— \$50
Williamsburg Land Conservancy	— \$100