



THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

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NEXT MEETING & FIELD TRIP

The Williamsburg Bird Club next meets on Wednesday, March 17 in Room 211, Millington Hall, William & Mary. Dan Cristol will discuss some of his current research. It will prepare listeners for the Saturday field trip which he will also lead. The field trip, on Saturday, March 20 will explore bird sites on the campus, home to most of our winter birds. A lucky find would be a yellow-throated warbler which has been seen in College Woods this early on rare occasions. Green-winged teal, gadwalls, ring-necked ducks, pied-billed grebes are frequently seen on Lake Matoka along with other passing water fowl. We will meet in front of Phi Beta Kappa Hall at 7:30 AM.

SPECIAL FIELD TRIP TO SEE WOODCOCK COURTSHIP FLIGHT

Alex Minarik will lead a field trip to the Chickahominy Wildlife Management Area on Saturday evening, March 20 to see the courtship flight of the American Woodcock. While there are no guarantees in birding, Alex and Mike have seen this display on many occasions at this time of the year at this location. We will meet in the Jamestown High School parking lot at 5:30 PM. The birds usually display between sunset and dusk. Sunset on March 20 is at 6:21 PM.

FEB FIELD TRIP TO CHEATHAM

Mother Nature again smiled on the Williamsburg Bird Club as the forecasted rain/snow storm of February 20 never materialized. The morning brought clear blue skies and crisp temperatures as

thirteen birders followed Bill Williams out to Cheatham Annex. Cold wind coming off of the York River deterred us from spending much time searching there for ducks but all other habitats were thoroughly covered. Anyone who has birded with Bill Williams knows that if there is a bird nearby, he will find it. We counted 58 species. Along with our common winter birds these included pied-billed grebe, horned grebe, tundra swan, mute swan, bufflehead, hooded merganser, red-breasted merganser, ruddy duck, bald eagle, sharp-shinned hawk, American coot, killdeer, belted kingfisher, yellow-bellied sapsucker, hairy woodpecker, brown-headed nuthatch, brown creeper, winter wren, golden-crowned and ruby-crowned kinglet, hermit thrush, yellow-rumped and pine warblers, eastern towhee, fox sparrow and swamp sparrow. Participants included Joy Archer, Bruce Boehm, Bettye Fields, Bobby and Ron Giese, Bill Holcombe, Alex Minarik, Chuck Rend, Richard Stanley, Jandy and Randy Strickland, Bill Williams and Marilyn Zeigler.

RESULTS OF THE GREAT BACKYARD BIRD COUNT

While we don't yet have an accurate way of measuring local participation in the count, we do have some indicators. Wild Birds Unlimited filed 78 daily reports and Bill Holcombe filed another 16 for club members. The Cornell computer site showed a very heavy concentration of reports all along the peninsula and down to the North Carolina border. It appears that about 125 reports for the Williamsburg area should be a reasonable guess, based upon what we do know.

Nationally, 16,230 participants filed 41,508

reports. Mourning dove got the highest number of reports for a single bird, 23,779 and the top ten birds were all familiar to Williamsburg backyards. The starling was the bird with the highest number count, 218,580 and the Canada goose was second with 191,038. The rest of the top ten were backyard birds ending with 124,000 house finches.

In Virginia 101 species were reported. The top ten species report and the top ten number-of-birds reports were quite similar to the national figures, except that in the count-of-numbers the American crow was highest at 15,690 followed by the common grackle and mourning dove. The starling was fourth at a count of 7,213. Birds that were scarce in Virginia, i.e., evening grosbeak, 3 counts; barred owl, 4 counts; and American woodcock, 4 counts, were scarce in Williamsburg too. The red-breasted nuthatch with 28 Virginia sightings of 43 birds is an exception to this observation as are the Virginia 266 sightings of 1,041 purple finches. Comparing the Virginia reports on house finches and purple finches makes one suspicious that some reporters were getting the two confused.

In the 16 submissions that I sent to Cornell the noteworthy birds seen by our members were an evening grosbeak, a winter wren and a sharp-shinned hawk.

I am sorry that these statistics make rather dull reading compared to what I thought was a rather up-beat four-day event. Wild Birds Unlimited was a sponsor and the local folks are trying to get the data for postal zip zones of 23188 and 23185.

TOURING HOTCHKISS REPORT

Ty and Julie Hotchkiss are in Texas and sent a report after touring the Aransas nature area. They report seeing three whooping cranes, lots of white pelicans, spoonbills, ibis, egrets, herons and ducks. They also encountered a bobcat at close range, "It was right beside the road as we came around a corner and stayed put for a few seconds while we looked at each other." We wish them continued adventure and good birding!

TWO SCHOLARSHIPS IN '99

The rising stock market has given our club's nest egg a big enough dividend that we will offer two students an opportunity to obtain a \$500 grant. These grants, given to help fund a graduate student's research project, are available if enough qualified participants apply for them.

BABY ARRIVES AT SCHUSTERS

Lee and Dave Schuster are the pleased and happy parents of Jenny Marie who arrived on February 24. This little bundle of joy weighed in at 5 lb, 3 oz. Joy and happiness to the Schusters!

PAINTED BUNTING EXCITEMENT

About February 20 a painted bunting appeared on Mrs. Henning's bird feeder in Toano and as of today, March 6, it is still there. Mrs. Henning has been extremely gracious in sharing the bird with us. If you are interested in seeing this amazing bird, she invites you to call her at 566-3926 so she can tell you how to come to her house. The bird has usually appeared at the feeder at about 8:15 AM and has stayed 4 to 5 minutes. Several of us have had the great pleasure of watching him: Joy Archer, Ruth Beck, Bill Holcombe, Cynthia Long, Alex Minarik, Durr Morton, Brian Taber, Marilyn Zeigler and undoubtedly others that I've not yet heard from. This is the eighth sighting on record in the club's history. Peterson's Field Guide shows the painted bunting wintering in southern Florida, then migrating along the coast up to mid-North Carolina. A map note says, "Casual or accidental north to Great Lakes, New England." This is a sparrow-sized bird with a navy blue head, pale green back, brick-red rump and breast and with that same brick red making a ring around each eye.

HELP WANTED!

"Old Salt" Bill Davies, seeks retirement from important Hiway Pick-Up Committee Chair position. "New Blood" needed. Low pay, long hours, four times a year. Nevertheless, rewarding work much appreciated by passing motorists and VDOT! Position environmentally friendly. Call

253-1467 for further details.

TIME TO START THINKING OF TROPICAL MIGRANTS

Here are some early migrants to watch for with arrival dates from our Annotated List:

Yellow-throated Warbler	March 14
Louisiana Water Thrush	March 16
Black and White Warbler	March 26
Yellow-breasted Chat	March 30
Prairie Warbler	March 30
Northern Parula	March 31
Prothonotary Warbler	April 1
Indigo Bunting	April 3
Blue-throated green Warbler	April 4
Redstart	April 11
Worm-eating Warbler	April 12
Hooded Warbler	April 12

BLUEBIRD TRAIL READY FOR NEW NESTS

Shirley Devan and Dorothy Whitfield started working on the Club's bluebird box trail at York River State Park last year. Based on what they learned, they have just about completed the reorganization for the 1999 Bluebird nesting season. It is a long trail of 41 boxes and this hard working pair plans to keep about that number.

"Last year we noted a lot of predation from English sparrows and some from snakes so we decided to move about twenty boxes. Our contact at the park is the Chief Ranger, Brad Johnson. He has been a big help. When Dorothy and I got there on a recent Saturday, those boxes were all loaded in the truck and all of the old numbers have been sandpapered off. Two park volunteers were on hand to help us too: Mark Gleaton and Brian Wilson. You'll be able to see what we did. Most of the relocated boxes are now positioned along the entrance road at very wide intervals."

This is a win-win location as the openness better suits the bluebirds, gets the boxes away from the sparrows which hang around the horse facility, eliminates snakes dropping onto boxes and makes servicing the trail much easier. Brad Johnson is lining up Boy Scouts who need nature projects to

put snake guards on all of the poles supporting the boxes. The boxes will be monitored according to the protocols established by the Virginia Bluebird Society and results will be reported to the Cornell lab through the Nest Box Network.

Shirley started working the Blue Bird Box Trail at Eastern State with Elaine Mertus before moving over the York River. "That is a very productive trail of 15 boxes and I hope that someone is keeping it up," said Shirley, "AND WE'D LOVE TO HAVE A FEW MORE PEOPLE WORKING WITH US TOO!"

The Club has been establishing and maintaining blue bird trails almost from the start of the club 25 years ago. When Ms. Jones and Grace and Joe Doyle got into the activity back then, bluebirds were a rather scarce species in this area. The success of the effort speaks for itself.

Shirley and Dorothy deserve a round of applause and a "Thank You" for the well organized effort that they are making at York River. And they'd love to have your help even for a couple of weeks during the nesting season when they may like a break.

VSO ANNUAL MEETING IN MAY

The Virginia Society of Ornithology will hold its Annual meeting at Tyson's Westpark Hotel, Tyson's Corner, VA starting Friday, May 7 and ending Sunday, May 9. Featured speakers will be Bob and Martha Sargent, bird banders licensed in 21 states who specialize in banding humming birds and are founders of Hummer/Bird Study Group.

Registration costs \$45 and is due by April 23. Make checks out to Northern Virginia Bird Club and mail with your name, address and phone and Saturday dinner selection of Breast of Chicken Marsala, Marinated London Broil, Salmon with Dill Sauce, or Vegetarian Meal, to VSO 99, Northern Virginia Bird Club, P.O. Box 9291, McLean, Va. 22102.

FIELD NOTES FOR FEBRUARY

We have had a wonderful February for notable birds. The **painted bunting** that has been seen at Mrs. Henning's feeder in Toano for three weeks now is undoubtedly the most notable. Almost as rare was the **golden eagle** that Brian Taber spotted flying over the Williamsburg Shopping Center. And, we finally got 1999 reports of **evening grosbeak** when Tom Armour sighted one at Kingsmill, Feb. 4. Rose Marie Teiffel saw one in her Queens Lake yard during the Great Back Yard Bird Count, Feb. 19. She also had a **wild turkey** in that yard. Grace and Joe Doyle set a new arrival date for the **yellow-throated warbler** when one appeared on their weekly Camp Peary walk, February 14. The same can be said for the **veery** which they reported on the same day except Joe left a question mark next to that one making it a "maybe." He felt that it was such an early sighting that it was worth reporting but uncertain enough to rate the question mark. Another birding couple, the Hertz' reported a **yellow breasted chat** at Season's Trace February 9, which shoots down the notation on this bird in our new Williamsburg Area List, "recorded all months but February." Speaking of early birds, Bill Williams saw an **osprey** and **tree swallows** at the Green Springs Nature Trail. Joy Archer called in a **screech owl** seen on Jamestown Island and she and Bill Holcombe reported **western sandpipers** at the causeway. Tom Armour saw **dunlin** in the same area. **Shoveler ducks** were reported by the Doyles in Kingsmill Pond and by Bill Holcombe at Hog Island on the last day of the month.

(For complicated reasons some of the sightings became separated from location of sightings and in such cases our records were used to place the sightings in a location. Residents and very common migratory birds are not usually included.)

Jamestown Island and Parkway to College Creek: tundra swan, western sandpiper, dunlin, black duck, goldeneye, red-breasted merganser, bald eagle, screech owl, great-horned owl, red-headed woodpecker, ruby-crowned kinglet, hermit thrush, brown thrasher, cedar waxwing, pine warbler, swamp sparrow.

Hog Island and Ferry: tundra swan, mute swan, bonaparte's gull, bufflehead, red-breasted

merganser, northern pintail, blue-wing teal, shoveler duck, ruddy ducks, gadwall (Chippokes Swamp), bald eagle, brown thrasher. At Chippokes wild turkey, phoebe, kestrel, cedar waxwing, meadowlark, swamp sparrow. At Sunken Meadow, tundra swan, gadwall, American wigeon, ring-necked duck, green-winged teal, wood duck.

Camp Peary: pied-billed grebe, great egret, tundra swan (130 on 2/14), mute swan, wood duck, green-winged teal, shoveler, gadwall, American widgeon, canvasback, ring-necked duck, goldeneye, bufflehead, hooded merganser, red-breasted merganser, ruddy duck, wild turkey, bald eagle, kestrel, belted kingfisher, red-headed woodpecker, red-breasted nuthatch, golden-crowned kinglet, veery(?), hermit thrush, cedar waxwing, pine warbler, rufous towhee, chipping sparrow, field sparrow.

York River (from Parkway): pied-billed grebe, horned grebe, brown pelican, tundra swan, ruddy duck, goldeneye, bufflehead, hooded merganser.

SPRING BIRD COUNT MAY 15

If you have been on a Spring Bird Count you know what a wonderfully satisfying day of birding this day brings. If you've never taken part you certainly owe yourself a balmy spring day in the field before the ticks and chiggers take over and when those beautiful tropical migrants are either arriving or passing through. And there is someone in each of our nine territories who can help you identify any of those birds that confuse you. On top of that you are adding to the nationwide understanding of what is happening to our bird population.

The territories are the same as in the Christmas Count: Camp Peary, Cheatham Annex, College Woods, Hog Island, Jamestown Island, Jolly Pond, Kingsmill, Mid-Plantation and Skimino. If you want to participate in a memorable birding day that you will like to savor, call **Brian Taber at 253-1181**. No matter what your skill level you will be a welcome participant for as much time as you can spend on the count.

BIRD OF THE MONTH

American Kestrel by Bill Holcombe

The American Kestrel is a member of the falcon family which is virtually world wide and has seven members in North America. The falcon name refers to the hooked feet (falcate) of these birds. The conspicuously toothed and notched bill more clearly separates falcons from hawks, as do the long pointed wings and generally longer tails. The diving attack of the falcons upon their prey also distinguishes them from the hawks. These birds have been clocked in that predatory dive at speeds approaching 200 miles an hour.

The kestrel is the smallest of the American falcon group and while it folds its wings and drops swiftly when pursuing prey, it does so from lower altitudes and does not obtain the dramatic speeds of its cousin, the peregrine. But this small falcon takes second place to none of its cousins where good looks are the measure. Like all falcons the female is clearly the larger of the two. Both have handsome rufous backs with darker barrings and white faces set off by black bars to the rear. There are black whisker marks down from the eye. The male has blue wings whereas the female's wings are the same rufous color of the back.

The rich, red-brown color of the back is an excellent field mark as no other hawk like bird has this coloration. The color flows down the tail which ends with a distinct black bar, with a narrow white stripping on the end. That rufous color also crowns the head but sits on a bluish saucer.

Not long ago this bird went by the name sparrow hawk but as the bird is a falcon and not a hawk, as sparrows make a small portion of its diet, and as there was a very similar European Kestrel, the American Kestrel seems to be a much more fitting name. The bird is found from mid-Canada south throughout the United States and through much of South America. The northern-most birds migrate but they are year round residents in most of the U.S.

We most frequently see them perched on wires or telephone poles searching the ground below for food. In this position the tails is frequently raised and lowered. Prey depends upon the time of year, is heavy in crickets, grasshoppers and mice in the

summer and includes more small birds in the winter. They also eat snakes, lizards and frogs. Kestrels also fly over fields with a combination flap and glide with frequent mid-air hoverings on rapidly flapping wings as they search for food. When prey is spotted they use the folded wings and rapid drop to grasp it in their talons. Then they fly to a perch to consume it.

No falcons seem to build nests and the kestrel is no exception, usually taking over old woodpecker nests or finding niches or holes under building eaves. They will also use nesting boxes built to their specifications. Egg laying starts in mid-March in Florida and progressively works its way north til late May to mid-June time in Canada. Incubation is done by the female who is called from the nest by the male and fed by him. Four to five white to pale pink eggs with brown blotches are laid and incubated for thirty days. The young leave the nest in another thirty days.

While the kestrel is fairly common in our area we have very little evidence of kestrels breeding here. They are frequently seen on wires and poles along nearby country roads. Chippokes Plantation is one of their more reliable locations in the area. They are seen in our area in all months of the year but seem to stay in more countryfied settings than their red tailed, red shouldered and sharp-shinned cousins demand.