



THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

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CORRECTION

The Spring Bird Count will be Sunday, May 16 and not the 15th as reported last month.

NEXT MEETING

We next meet April 21 in Room 211, Millington Hall on the campus of William and Mary. Dan Cristol has arranged for Karen Johnson to present her research report on, "The Migration of the White-throated Sparrow." Karen is a graduate student in the Biology Department at William and Mary and was the recipient of the Club's \$500 research grant for this year.

APRIL FIELD TRIP TO DISMAL SWAMP

On Saturday, April 24, Don Schwab of the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries will lead a field trip to the Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Reserve. We will meet at 6:15 AM at the Fresh Market parking lot to car pool to the refuge and will leave the refuge at 11 AM to return to Williamsburg. Please wear long sleeves and pants, a hat and lots of bug repellent. You may also want to bring a snack and something to drink.

During the breeding season the refuge is a paradise for song birds, including an excellent variety of warblers. The following species, some whose singing peaks in mid-April, should be seen or heard: (warblers) prothonotary, swainson's, black-throated green, hooded, yellow-throated, prairie, American redstart, northern parula, Louisiana waterthrush, worm-eating warbler,

ovenbird, common yellowthroat; yellow-billed cuckoo, Acadian flycatcher, red-eyed, white-eyed and yellow-throated vireos, scarlet and summer tanagers and wood thrush. If we see most of those you will be glad that you got up at 5 AM!

TOURING THE COLLEGE WITH DAN CRISTOL

Dan Cristol led a large, eager group of birders to the far reaches of the William and Mary campus on the March 20 field trip. He showed us his "secret aviary" where he does his current research on the white-throated sparrow and led us through College Woods to see the bird trapping stations that he and his students monitor. After birding the adjacent areas we headed to Lake Matoka to check out the water fowl.

A total of fifty species of birds were seen or heard. Although no early spring surprises appeared, the group was awed by the early morning flock of tundra swans that flew honking overhead. Dan said that he'd heard them going over all night long. Participants included Joy Archer, Dan Cristol, Shirley Devan, Bob Fritts, Terry Johnston, Dick Marshall, Mike and Alex Minarik, Charles Rend, Sue Gray Al-Salam, Richard Stanley, Jandy and Randy Strickland, Dorothy Whitfield, and Anne and Phil Young.

PURSUING WOODCOCK MATING FLIGHTS WITH ALEX MINARIK

A group of us had a very special experience Saturday evening, March 20, when we followed Alex and Mike to a large open field frequented by woodcock. They had discovered the field while

walking in the Chickahominy Wildlife Management Area. For most of us who had never been there, the evening was a huge success just finding this wonderfully wild area only twenty minutes from Jamestown High School. The icing on that cake was an opportunity to witness the evening mating ritual flights of the male woodcock that were taking off from that large field.

Alex explained that there is a rather narrow window of time during which these flights can be seen. The birds do not start performing until after sunset, which leaves twenty to thirty minutes of fading light for observation. The flights end at sunup which provides about the same time frame for observation on that end of the night, as the dark gives way to sunup.

On Saturday night, the waiting time void was filled by a hooting barred owl and a wonderful migrating flight of honking Canada geese in a huge two hundred bird V with another fifty or so in a staggered line flying nearby. But about 10-15 minutes after Alex announced sunset, sharp clicking noises (described by Terres as “a nasal >peent”) were heard from woodcocks on the ground. Actually one hears more than one can see of this unusual phenomenon. The three-part flight begins with the male repeating the buzzy “peent” call on the ground. Next, he leaps from the ground and flies upward in a circling, spiral pattern and making a ticking sound. The third stage starts as he falls to the ground with outstretched wings in sort of a falling leaf pattern, during which the wings make a squeaky, high pitched “eraser” sound. Those with very sharp eyesight were able to pick out the upward flight of the birds as they ascended 100 to 200 feet or more. If the flight has been stimulating enough to a hen waiting for him on the ground, they mate.

Depending upon the acuity of eyes and ears some of us heard and saw almost all of this. Most could hear all of the sounds and everyone could hear some of them. The happy group enjoying this experience included Tom Ellis and Ann Moore, Bill Holcombe, Carolyn Lowe, Alex and Mike Minarik, Richard Stanley, Jandy Strickland, Judy Thompson and Phil Young.

Where is it? About 20 minutes past the Chickahominy River. Go out Route 5 over the

Chickahominy River and take the first road on the right, Wilcox Neck Road (Route 623) which is 3.9 miles from the bridge. Again, take the first right after another 3.9 miles, onto Eagle Nest Road (Route 621). From this turn the field is 2.1 miles on the left. There is a clearly visible entrance to the field over the shoulder where stones were scattered to make an entrance driveway when the field was timbered. You can also continue past this field to a dock and a boat launching area on Morris Creek. The creek leads to the Chickahominy River.

AUDUBON SAYS CONGRESS PASSES “A VICTORY FOR THE BIRDS”

The House Resources Committee passed the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act, H.R. 39. Daniel Beard, Senior Vice President for Public Policy for the Audubon Society said, “Committee passage of the bill is an important victory for birds.”

The legislation uses federal dollars to help build partnerships with the business community, non-governmental organizations and foreign nations to provide bird and habitat conservation for neotropical migratory birds in their winter homes. Beard commended the committee for their successful efforts to keep crippling amendments from the legislation.

Nice to hear that Congress can sometimes do the right thing!

FINAL ON THE GREAT BACK YARD BIRD COUNT

Internet filers were asked to list their favorite birds and while the results are hardly surprising, they are sort of interesting. The ten top favorites in order were: black-capped chickadee, northern cardinal, ruby-throated humming bird, eastern bluebird, great blue heron, bald eagle, common loon, and carolina wren.

The wind-up report from the Cornell Lab invites your participation in other upcoming report programs throughout the year. Warbler Watch will be activated on the Internet sometime soon

for you to post your warbler sightings through the spring migration and on their breeding grounds. In the fall “we’ll ask your help in counting and tracking hawks on their fall migration.” Then there are Project Feeder Watch, Christmas Bird Count, North American Finch Survey, and next year’s Great Backyard Bird Count. As Cornell provides details we will report them in the Flyer.

BIRD OF THE MONTH

The American Woodcock by Bill Holcombe

The American Woodcock is one of those birds reported around here on only rare occasions. But after our recent special event trip with Alex Minarik (reported elsewhere in this Flyer), it seemed the right time to focus some attention on a bird which I suspect is not so rare as the reports would have us believe. The bird is perfectly camouflaged for its do-nothing day activity. When it performs its absolutely spectacular courtship flight it does so in the dim half light of evening or pre-sunrise.

There are many surprises relating to this bird. First of all it is a member of the sandpiper family and is closely related to the snipe which is also part of that family. The Woodcock’s Greek genus name, *philohela* means *marsh loving*. The bird doesn’t just love marshy areas—it will die if it is kept from them very long. This chunky, 11-inch bird has a 2-inch bill that is peculiarly adapted to finding earth worms in marshy soil. When feeding, usually at dusk or early morning, it stamps its foot on the ground, apparently to stir the earth worms to motion. Then it plunges this beak into moist soil “to probe with the highly sensitive mobile tip for earth worms which it apparently feels,” opens the tip, grasps the worm and pulls it from the soil. This is a voracious feeder that has been known to eat its weight in earth worms within 24 hours. Woodcocks can adapt to brief dry spells by turning over leaves and eating slugs, snails, salamanders and some insects. They do the same when they are caught on frozen ground during migration or on its winter range. But they suffer seriously and can die in large numbers if the freeze lasts very long.

The Woodcock is a migratory game bird hunted in the fall in all states east of the Mississippi and

nests in the entire United States area east the Mississippi. It is a ball-like bird with an extremely short neck, long bill, short stubby wings, and large dark eyes set high in the head. When squatted on the ground its variegated brown, blacks and grays above and rusty coloring below, blend in with a dead leaf pattern on the forest floor. There are three dark bands on the back of the head separated by rufous coloring. When startled into flight the stubby wings produce a twittering whistle sound.

It lives in marshy, damp woods or second growth where the soil is moist and usually near a grassy, brushy field or near a stream that creates the necessary moist soil condition. It is mostly inactive during the day, feeding at dawn and dusk. From March to June it may be found engaging in its spectacular courtship flights at these same hours. At that time it moves out into the open fields. Commencing after sunset the male rises in a circular flight as high as three hundred feet with the wings providing the peculiar rushing whistle sound. At the top of his climb he hovers and starts a chirping sound which continues as he falls to earth in sort of a side-to-side dead leaf path. The sound of the wings combines with the chirping until he reaches the ground. On the ground he utters a nasal *peent* sound (similar to a night hawk) and if his performance has attracted a hen, they mate. This activity can be repeated until dark and the activity has been reported continuing through the night when the moon provides light.

One of the earliest migrators, the bird leaves its southeastern wintering grounds in January or February and follows the moving frost line northward. Migrating flocks can be heavy when the birds reach their northern nesting grounds in the March or April. The nest is a simple depression on the leaf-strewn ground, lined with leaves and outlined with twigs. It is usually placed near a fallen bush, a tree or a stump. Four buffy or cinnamon color eggs with darker blotches are laid in January or February in the southern range and usually in March or April farther north. The nest is always near the male’s singing field. The male is completely promiscuous in his mating and the incubating is done by the female for about 21 days. She will move the eggs to a new location if disturbed. If disturbed while incubating, she flies off from the nest dragging her feet and feigning a

broken wing until she has drawn the intruder off. There also are reports of her grasping the chicks one at a time between her legs and flying them to a new location. They can probe for worms only a few days after hatching and at 28 days the chicks can fly strongly. Broods break up with all birds going their own ways roughly 50 days after hatching.

Miscellaneous: Banded birds have been identified as living beyond eight years. Other names for this bird are bog-borer, bog-sucker, night partridge, timber-doodle, whistling-snipe and mud-snipe.

Females average an ounce heavier than males.

Our Club's annotated list calls the American Woodcock a common migrant here and a rare breeder that has been reported all months except November, with a primary location at Archer's Hope along the Colonial Parkway. It has also been reported at dawn and dusk at the airport, in the fields in back of the houses along Neck O'Land Road, and now in open fields in the Chickahominy Game Management Area. It seems possible that we would hear a lot more of this bird if more of us were looking during those special twenty minute periods before dark and before sunrise. Then, if you're as lucky as Bill Sheehan, one will pop up in your back yard. That happened late this winter.

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

FIELD NOTES FOR MARCH

The northward flight of the migrants was clearly under way. **Yellow-throated warblers** were seen by Joy Archer and Bill Sheehan on the James River Colonial Parkway. Brian Taber had **Purple Martins** at College Creek March 30. And Bill Williams reported the first **blue-gray gnat-catcher** of the spring from the Jamestown High nature trail. **Cattle egrets** were seen at Hog Island. **Brown pelicans** were reported on the York River by several members and one was seen on the James off the Kingsmill Marina. At least one reader of last month's Flyer, Tom McCary, called our gracious Mrs. Henning after reading about her **painted bunting**, and found that it was still there. He was rewarded by a five minute viewing at her bird feeder. And Tom Armour and

Bill Sheehan were rewarded with **boat-tailed grackles** at the Indian Field turnout on the York River Colonial Parkway. On the same outing they spotted a fairly rare winter visitor, a **red-throated loon** near the Coleman bridge. A **red-headed duck** was seen on the James at Archer's Hope by Bill Williams. Joy Archer caught a *rare common merganser* at College Creek. Joy just had a memorable month by adding a **screech owl** at Jamestown Island, a **fox sparrow** in her back yard and **wild turkeys** on Route 5 near Five Forks. As the month ended Tom Armour caught up with **purple finches** which have been very scarce this winter, a female at his feeder March 30 and two more at Ford's Colony on the 31st. Brian Taber has started his hawk watch and saw a **goshawk** at College Creek and Joe Doyle reported a **broad-winged hawk** from Camp Peary. **Phoebes, brown thrashers** and **tree swallows** have been widely seen, and **laughing gulls, Bonaparte's gulls** and **Forster's terns** are on the James in common numbers.

Jamestown Is. and Nearby Colonial Parkway

Great egret, American black duck, red head duck, red-breasted merganser, common merganser, common snipe, goshawk, screech owl, great horned owl, belted kingfisher, red-headed woodpecker, yellow-bellied sapsucker, phoebe, fish crow, brown creeper, ruby-crowned kinglet, hermit thrush, brown thrasher, cedar waxwing, pine warbler, yellow-throated warbler.

Hog Island, Chippokes and Ferry

Great Egret, cattle egret, tundra swan, mute swan, wood duck, green-winged teal, blue-winged teal, northern shoveler, gadwall, hooded merganser, red breasted merganser, American coot, laughing gull, Bonaparte's gull, Forster's tern, bald eagle, northern harrier, Cooper's hawk, phoebe, tree swallow, fish crow, golden-crowned kinglet, ruby-crowned kinglet, cedar waxwing, chipping sparrow, field sparrow, rusty blackbird. (Chippokes) black vulture, kestrel, sharp shinned hawk, wild turkey, eastern meadowlark, phoebe, tree swallow.

York River and Nearby Colonial Parkway

Red-throated loon, common loon, pied billed grebe, horned grebe, brown pelican, great egret, tundra swan, mute swan, American widgeon,

canvasback, ring-necked duck, lesser scaup,
common goldeneye, bufflehead, hooded
merganser, red-breasted merganser, ruddy duck,
osprey, bald eagle.