



THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

Volume 23, Number 7

August 1999

NEXT MEETING

Our next meeting will be the first of the fall season. We will meet in Room 117, Millington Hall on the William and Mary campus. Program Director Dan Cristol has been working this summer while the rest of us loafed. The September program will be presented by Peter Smallwood, an ecologist, who is a professor at the University of Richmond. His program is entitled, "Family Planning for Kestrels."

BIRDING TEAM TAKES TO FIELD

Tom Armour, Brian Taber and Bill Williams will compete again this year for the best birding team in order to raise money for **Coastal Virginia Wildlife Observatory**. Up until last spring that organization was known as K.E.S.T.R.E.L. but the name was changed to better identify its function and purpose. Last year the birding event had a different name too, "The Super Bowl of Birding." It's now known as the "Kiptopeke Challenge." While all of this name changing may seem confusing, the purpose of the contest is still to raise funds for the support of bird research at Kiptopeke. This year the funds will spread to some other areas near Kiptopeke where the activities have expanded. Raptor banding will move to Fisherman Island and spring migration studies will move to the Eastern Shore of Virginia Natural Wildlife Refuge.

Over the past few years this competition has raised up to \$700. Williamsburg Bird Club member support has helped to accomplish this and, of course, our "Top Gun" birders are very thankful. Our hard working team has recorded some first and second place finishes in this event.

Please continue to support their effort by sending the team a supporting contribution. Mail your support to Brian Taber, 103 Exeter Court, Williamsburg, VA 23185, by September 10. Make checks payable to "Kiptopeke Challenge." The event takes place on September 18. The teams strive to identify the largest number of bird species in that area during a 24 hour period.

RUTH BECK WILL LEAD US TO CRANEY ISLAND AUGUST 14

Ruth's field trip to Craney Island is the best shore bird trip of the year. It has frequently turned up species that you are not likely to see elsewhere, such as the Wilson Phalarope, the Horned Lark, Wilson's Plover and the Marbled Godwit. There is no guarantee that any of those will appear but we've had excellent luck over the past few years. In recent years the good luck even extended to the weather, but it is wise to come prepared for a hot day with some mosquitoes. A hat, long sleeved shirt, full-length slacks, bug repellent spray and cold drinking water are recommendations. You are also urged to bring a lunch and a drink to go with it. There are toilet facilities at the entrance to the place. Craney Island is toured by car with frequent stops at likely birding spots, so you needn't worry about carrying a lot of stuff.

We will meet in the Colonial Shopping Center parking lot (the side near the street) at 7:15 AM and leave at 7:30 in as few cars as needed. We will be back between 1 and 2 PM. The Colonial Shopping Center is on Jamestown Road just west of 199 and is the one with the Fresh Market and the Polo Club.

VSO CHANGES CHECKLIST

All of us have spent some time struggling with the order in which birds are listed by the ornithology scientists. Well, just as you might have gotten comfortable with it, the VSO again changed the order in their printed checklists. Vultures have been moved from following the ducks to following the ibis and storks. Vireos have gone from starting the warbler list to falling between shrikes and blue jays. We may have missed a few other changes, and we're sorry, but we can't tell you why they were made.

RARER BIRDS THAT YOU MIGHT JUST SEE

A recently arrived copy of *The Raven*, official publication of the Virginia Society of Ornithology, listed the unusual sightings accepted for the society's record in 1998. Three new species were accepted in 1998 and will be added to the Virginia check-list: the Herald Petrel, Allen's Hummingbird and the Spotted Towhee.

This approval procedure is a rigorous one. The review committee includes three members of the Williamsburg Bird Club, Dan Cristol, Brian Taber and Bill Williams. Fifty one sightings were accepted, six were rejected and 29 remain under review. The number of sea bird sightings under review rose in 1996 due to the 1996 hurricanes "Bertha" and "Fran," which blew many sea birds into inland locations. Here is a partial listing, leaving out the birds that are fairly common around here but which are treated as rare sightings in other parts of the state: Black-capped Petrel, Herald Petrel, Fea's Petrel, Cory's Shearwater, Band-rumped Storm Petrel, Ross's Goose, Black Rail, Wilson's Phalarope, Red-necked Phalarope, Red Phalarope, Pomarine Jaeger, Parasitic Jaeger, Long-tailed Jaeger, Black-tailed Gull, Thayer's Gull, Sabine's Gull, Sandwich Tern, Arctic Tern, Bridled Tern, Sooty Tern, Allen's Hummingbird, Spotted Towhee and LeConte's Sparrow.

The Spotted Towhee was seen in our own backyard, York County/ James City County, by Edward Brinkley and is a first accepted State and Coastal Plain record. This report had been under study since February 1995. Better look that one up in the field guides.

CORNELL NEST BOX NETWORK CHANGES

Cornell announced the phasing out of paper reports connected with their Nest Box program. The success of computer reporting and the expense of processing paper reports prompts this change. They also urge everyone to continue using the computer site, <<http://birds.cornell.edu>>, to add any unreported birdhouse information that you can contribute.

CORNELL FEEDER WATCH PROGRAM

A new season of the Cornell Feeder Watch Program starts this fall. Just in case you are interested in joining in, an application blank is reprinted in this *Flyer* for your convenience.

The Feeder Watch Program, combined with the Christmas Bird Count and the Spring counts, provides a great deal of information on where the birds are, how stable their populations are, whether their territories are changing and whether their numbers are rising or falling.

It is an all volunteer program conducted by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. When you join this program you will receive a booklet explaining in detail what you do and how to do it. Listed below are the highlights of the program:

- The program starts November 14 and ends on April 9. Based upon the first letter of your last name, you select a chart of ten periods between these dates and then choose two consecutive days from each in which you will monitor your area.
- You define your area, one that must include the property and feeders visible from the windows of your residence, and you follow instructions for reporting all birds seen in that area, *and only in that area*, during your count days
- Transfer your count to the data sheet provided and either mail it to the Cornell Lab or transmit the information electronically through the Cornell Lab Web Site.

While this started as a winter watch program and continues that way, plans are being made to offer participants a year-round watch program.

We are not certain how many club members participate in this program but do know that Bill Sheehan does. Lee Schuster was an original participant in the in-school version of this program. Both would be happy to answer questions that you may have before getting started. If you decide to participate, will you let Bill Holcombe know at a meeting, at 229-8057 or by dropping him a note at 4705 Lady Slipper Path, Williamsburg, VA 23188.

BIRD OF THE MONTH

Three “Peep” Sandpipers: Least Sandpiper, Semipalmated Sandpiper, Western Sandpiper

On the trip to Craney Island bird watchers frequently encounter all three of these birds and they spend a great deal of time searching for distinguishing field marks of these very similar, small sandpipers. Now seems to be a good time to review this interesting group of peep sandpipers in preparation for our field trip on August 14. The basic rules are that if the legs are yellowish-green it is a Least Sandpiper. If the legs are dark or blackish, it is either the Semipalmated Sandpiper or the Western. What separates these two is that the Western has a longer, heavier bill that can sometimes be seen to turn slightly downward, whereas the Semipalmated’s bill is slimmer, shorter and more pointed. The Western’s bill is at least as long as its head. Without these distinguishing field marks we are dealing with a 5 to 7-inch sandpiper with sexes outwardly alike, although the female in all three species is slightly larger than the male. All are a sandy, buffy, blotchy gray that is flecked with darker specks above and whitish below. All have a light line above the eye and some streaking on the breast. Guide books call some buffier at certain times of the year, refer to “slimmer heads and necks,” and other bits of minutia that are extremely difficult to use to identify birds whose size and color ranges overlap. It is true that the Least Sandpiper averages the smallest of these three, but a large Least may well be larger than a small Semipalmated.

In general the behavior of each is similar. On the beach they scurry on twinkling legs up and down

he beach following the edges of advancing and receding waves and stabbing at food bits as they go, behaving much like Sanderlings. In the marshes, mudflats and sandy edges of bays and salt-water ponds they walk about stabbing into the soil and shallow water for edibles. Similar behavior is found inland along the edges of rivers and ponds. When startled they rise in the air in a close packed bunch and wheel about before settling down to continue feeding.

Their ranges, while not identical, are very similar. All winter along the southern coasts of the United States and into Mexico, the West Indies, Columbia, Ecuador, Chile and Peru. By the later half of May they are on their nesting grounds in Alaska and across the Tundra of Canada. The Western Sandpiper, however, nests almost exclusively in Alaska. The non-nesting birds of all three species are found throughout the summer along the coasts and bays of North America.

All three make nests in depressions on the ground that they line with grass. They typically lay four pale eggs with darker blotches and the incubation work is done by both sexes. Incubation lasts 18-20 days and the young fly 14-19 days after hatching. Terres identifies all three with a “*kreep*” call, although there are some minor vocalization differences.

Banding records indicate that all three can exceed the age of seven years which means that these one-ounce birds may have made seven round trips of over 4,000 miles each in their lifetimes!

So when you see these delightful, water-edge birds at Craney, try to distinguish the colors of the legs first and then use the lengths and stoutness of the bills next. The downturning of the Westerns’ bills is sometimes difficult to detect. And leg color in murky water is not always certain either. Have fun and pay attention. Ruth will make it all seem easy.

FIELD NOTES JULY—AUGUST

John McDowell passed along a weather-related bird story that, while unfortunate, might be instructive in how we place our bird boxes. A man in Queen’s Lake was showing his grandson a nesting **Bluebird** box and discovered that the male **Bluebird** sitting on the nest and all of the

nestlings under him were dead. When he checked his neighbor's box he found exactly the same situation. Ruth Beck confirms the fact that while it is not all that common, intense heat can kill cavity nesting birds. Shirley Devan reports a box of dead, newly hatched **Bluebirds** and suspects that the heat was the problem.

But Shirley also had some good news. They are close to completing this year's work on the York River State Park Bluebird Trail with a result of 90 fledged **Bluebirds** and 23 **Chickadees**, compared to a total of 65 **Bluebirds** last year. A rousing cheer for **Shirley Devan** and **Dorothy Whitfield** who took responsibility for the trail this year!

Dick Reeves happily reports **Indigo Buntings** nesting in his back yard. April Coleman says that they have **Kingbirds** nesting in *their* yard for the first time, but flying squirrels took over the Wood Duck box. Tom Armour had **House Wrens** move into a box for the first time in many years. The Holcombes had **Cardinals** nesting in the front and **Rufous-sided Towhees**, for the first time, in the back. And quite a few people report **Crows** are nesting near them. A **Hooded Warbler** appeared on Dorothy Whitfield's feeder in late July and sent her running for her book, as this was a first for her. **Yellow-billed Cuckoos** have been audibly in evidence almost everywhere, while remaining amazingly well hidden. **Wood Thrushes** have been delightfully entertaining almost every morning and evening and are even brave enough to show themselves from time to time. Bill Holcombe got the last of the Spring Count cards from Martha Briggs in June, ending the six year run of that activity. Martha and he had the only cards. Bill's count of 123 was not notable, but as usual Martha had some nice comments, "**Bald Eagle** lifting a large fish from first stream on Jamestown Island" and "**Whip-poor-will** on May 21. Either he was late this year or I was!"

Camp Peary

Great Egret, Green-backed Heron, Mute Swan, Wood Duck, Black Vulture, Bald Eagle, Kestrel, Wild Turkey, Bobwhite, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Red-headed Woodpecker, Belted Kingfisher, Wood-pewee, Acadian Flycatcher, Great-crested Flycatcher, Eastern Kingbird, Purple Martin, Tree Swallow, Northern Rough-winged

Swallow, Barn Swallow, Fish Crow, Brown-headed Nuthatch, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Wood Thrush, Brown Thrasher, White-eyed Vireo, Red-eyed Vireo, Yellow-breasted Warbler, Pine Warbler, Prairie Warbler, Ovenbird, Common Yellowthroat, Yellow-breasted Chat, Summer Tanager, Scarlet Tanager, Blue Grosbeak, Indigo Bunting, Rufous-sided Towhee, Field Sparrow, Brown Cowbird.

BIRD SHOW ON TELEVISION

We certainly hope none of our members have missed any of those wonderful programs appearing on Tuesday nights at 8 PM on Public Television. It's a ten-week series produced by BBC and hosted by David Attenborough. Three episodes have passed by, but if you've missed them be sure to tune in for the rest. We haven't seen them before so don't believe they're reruns.

Citizen Science at the Lab: Five Easy Ways to Sign Up

- ◆ MAIL one of these coupons today.
- ◆ CALL (800) 843-BIRD (2473).
- ◆ FAX your order and credit card number to (607) 254-2435.
- ◆ E-MAIL. Send e-mail to <cornellbirds@cornell.edu>.
- ◆ WEB SITE. Use the online form at <http://birds.cornell.edu>.
Click on Citizen Science and pick your project.

Join Project FeederWatch 1999-2000

<<http://birdsource.cornell.edu/pfw>>



Project FeederWatch is for anyone with a bird feeder. Whether you are an amateur or a professional birder, you will enjoy monitoring the birds that visit your backyard bird feeder. And the data you collect are put to good use for bird conservation. You'll receive a Project Kit with instructions, tips for bird feeding, a full-color poster of Common Feeder Birds in your region, and a colorful wall poster to help you keep track of bird counts.

Yes, sign me up for FeederWatch. Send me the Project Kit and the next four issues of *Birdscope*.

Please make check payable to Project FeederWatch and send it to
PFW/CLO, P.O. Box 11, Ithaca, NY 14851-0011
Or call (800) 843-BIRD (2473)*

\$15.00 \$12.00 for Cornell Lab of Ornithology members

Name _____

Lab ID # _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ ZIP code _____

Phone number _____

E-mail _____

Please charge my participation fee to my _____

VISA MasterCard DISCOVER

Account number _____

Expiration date _____ Signature _____

Please accept my tax-deductible gift of \$ _____ to help support Project FeederWatch. Total amount charged to my credit card \$ _____.

Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology/National Audubon Society

**Residents of Canada should call Bird Studies Canada at (888) 448-2473.*

BSF