



# THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

Volume 23, Number 8

September 1999

## NEXT MEETING

Our next meeting will be the first of the new fall season, 7:30 PM on September 15. We will meet in Room 117, Millington Hall on the William and Mary campus. The September program that Dan Cristal has arranged will be a talk by Peter Smallwood, an ecologist-professor at the University of Richmond. His program: "Family Planning for Kestrels."

## GREAT DAY AT CRANEY ISLAND

On August 14 Ruth Beck led a small but enthusiastic group of Williamsburg Bird Club members on the annual Crane Island field trip. Bill Holcomb, Camilla Buchanan, Jandy Strickland, Dave Anderton and Marilyn Zeigler met Ruth at 0730 hours at Colonial Shopping Center. The weather was delightfully cool, a welcome relief from the extreme heat and humidity of July and early August. The sky remained overcast all day, but a persistent breeze off the bay kept the dreaded mosquitoes at bay.

Ruth radiated her usual enthusiasm as she patiently guided our efforts to correctly identify the numerous shore birds we encountered. Our trip list included: osprey, mallard, brown pelican, double crested cormorant, greater and lesser yellowlegs, black necked stilt, American avocet, great egret and snowy egret, Wilson's phalarope and a short-billed dowitcher. We saw three different sandpipers, semi-palmated, spotted and western; three plovers, black bellied, semi-palmated and the killdeer; five terns, Caspian, royal, gull-billed, least and black; three gulls, herring, laughing and black backed, and a ruddy turnstone. Other birds seen were a blue grosbeak,

red winged blackbirds, mockingbird, boat tailed grackle, starlings, mourning dove and song sparrow. A red tailed hawk sat motionless on a post about twenty-five feet from the car while we gazed at it for several minutes. And finally we were able to look closely at barn, cliff, tree and rough winged swallows as they sat quite still on a three-tiered railing while we compared and contrasted their markings.

With good birding, good weather, and good company, our Craney Island trip was enjoyed by everyone who attended. — Camilla Buchanan

## SUNDAY FIELD TRIP TO GREEN-SPRINGS TRAIL, SEPTEMBER 19th

Bill Williams has regularly walked the Greensprings Nature Trail in back of Jamestown High School ever since it opened and has found it to be a very productive birding area. The group will take a two mile walk around the Beaver Pond and the mix of pond and heavy woods there. The area offers a varied habitat that can include both osprey and woodland warblers and thrushes.

Bill will be participating in the Kiptopeke Challenge on Saturday, Sept. 18 hence this unusual *Sunday* Field Trip.

Participants will meet in the parking lot behind Jamestown High School, near the tennis courts, at 7:30 AM.

## BALD EAGLES NEED OUR HELP

In July 1999 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service published an Advance Notice of Intent to remove the bald eagle from the federal list of threatened and endangered species. The Notice of Intent

outlines the position of the Fish and Wildlife Service that the bald eagle has fully recovered and as such should be removed from protection under the provisions of The Endangered Species Act. We concur with the notice that the bald eagle population has surpassed specific population recovery goals set for delisting. However, in addition to restoring species, one of the stated purposes of The Endangered Species Act is to insure that species are self-sustaining.

One of the most pressing questions for the Chesapeake Bay bald eagle is not can we recover the population, but rather, can we sustain a recovered population. The Chesapeake Bay is experiencing an unprecedented rate of shoreline development that is rapidly reducing habitat available for bald eagles. Virtually every biologist who has worked closely with the population now feels that observed habitat loss rates will result in a population reversal in the foreseeable future. The notice gives no indication that the Fish and Wildlife Service intends to assess available habitat or to begin the process of developing a habitat plan.

In light of concerns pertaining to future population maintenance, the Center for Conservation Biology formally requested a public hearing to discuss potential impacts of delisting on the Chesapeake Bay population. The hearing has been scheduled for 21 September 1999. The hearing will begin at 6 PM and will be held in the auditorium at York County High School. The Center for Conservation Biology has prepared: 1) a brief response to the USFWS Notice of Intent; 2) a comprehensive overview of the context and consequences of delisting for the Bay population; and 3) an information sheet describing how you may participate in the delisting process.

This is an historic event. All concerned citizens should attend. We look forward to your input and participation. To receive a packet of information, please contact:

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*of this issue. — Ed*

## THE KIPTOPEKE CHALLENGE

The Williamsburg team of Tom Armour, Bill Williams and Brian Taber will participate again in the birding competition, "The Kiptopeke Challenge." Formerly known as the "Super Bowl of Birding," the event raises awareness about bird conservation and generates funds for research and public education programs carried out by Coastal Virginia Wildlife Observatory. This new name replaces KESTREL, which stood for Kiptopeke Environmental Station, Research and Education Laboratory. The new name emphasizes the broadening perspectives of the organization.

Research and public education are still the primary goals of the Observatory, which conducts work mainly at Kiptopeke State Park, Fisherman's Island National Wildlife Refuge and The Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge

The Kiptopeke Challenge is an all day event where teams of birders compete to identify as many species as possible on the Virginia Eastern Shore. This year's date of September 18<sup>th</sup> will be right in the midst of the fall songbird and hawk migration. From 1995 through 1998 our team found, respectively, 101, 110, 120 and 130 species. Last year, they found an Ivory Gull, a rare stray from the Arctic and a bird for which there are no other Virginia records. Who knows what surprises they'll find this year.

Our team depends upon pledges of support from concerned individuals and businesses. Last year, we raised more than \$700 and the event raised \$2,200. If you would like to make a tax-deductible donation to our team, please make it payable to Coastal Virginia Wildlife Observatory and send it to Brian Taber at 103 Exeter Court, Williamsburg, Va. 23185. All proceeds go to the Observatory and all supporters will receive a report of the day's results.

The goals of the Observatory are to contribute to the understanding of bird and insect migration by: promoting, conducting and financially supporting research studies; producing educational materials; serving as a resource of information and networking with other observatories and organiza-

tions that provide on-site interpretation.

The heart of the study area is the southernmost three miles of the Virginia Eastern Shore peninsula, from Kiptopeke State Park to the Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge and Fisherman Island National Wildlife Refuge on Virginia's southernmost barrier island. This small area has yielded significant insights into the volume, timing, distribution and species diversity of bird and insect migration. It ranks as one of the most significant migration areas in North America, a vital link in the Canada-to-South America flyway.

## **100th CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT**

The 1999 Christmas Bird Count will be the 100<sup>th</sup> celebration of this Audubon event and if you would like to be a participant, block out that date now. The date is December 19th.

The first count was organized by a respected ornithologist, Frank Chapman who assembled 25 other counters to protest a tradition called "the side hunt," in which participants hunted all species, the winner being the one who shot the most individuals and the most species. This year 1,700 individual Christmas Counts will be held during the two and a half week count period. Each team covers a circular area 15 miles in diameter reporting all of the species and numbers observed in a twenty four hour period. Our team is divided into nine groups, each covering a specific part of our 15 mile circle.

Results from the count continue to be integral in assembling "WatchList," a record of 115 bird species in danger of decline due to threats such as habitat loss. A project of "Partners in Flight" (our bird club is a member,) WatchList has become the centerpiece of bird conservation efforts.

## **LOWER JAMES SUPPORTS LARGE CONCENTRATION OF SUMMER BALD EAGLES**

*(This is a condensation of an article in the VSOP quarterly, The Raven, written by Bryan Watts and Mitchell Byrd.)*

The lower James River is believed to support the

largest concentration of summering eagles in eastern North America. During the summer months, the number of eagles using the lower James swells as birds move into the river to utilize foraging areas. Their distribution along the shoreline appears to have increased substantially. The first indication of this phenomenon came during the summer of 1971 when Byrd and others observed ten juvenile eagles and eight adults on the shoreline at a time when only two pairs of eagles were known to be breeding in the area. Studies of a 30 kilometer stretch of this shoreline commencing below Hopewell and extending below the Benjamin Harrison Bridge have now been extended to the west side of Mulberry Island, opposite Newport News. This increases the shoreline area to 235 kilometers. Studies of the original shoreline were conducted every summer from 1980 through 1997.

Peak counts fall between mid-June and mid-July. Between 1980 and 1991 peak count on the original 30 km of shoreline increased from 40 to almost 148. From '91 to '95 the numbers were stable, but after 1995 they showed a decline in the original study area, falling to a low of 98 in 1996. In 1997 eight surveys were made along the extended shoreline of 235 kilometers. A peak count of 448 occurred on June 11 and a low of 239 on August 11. The peak count approaches an average of 2 birds per kilometer of shoreline. This value is comparable to birds per kilometer in the peak counts in the much smaller original study area. However, the expanded study area is eight times larger and is indicative of the dramatic increase in the number of eagles summering along this stretch of the James. It is likely that the decline in density of birds in the smaller original area was caused by a population spread both east and west along the James. Continued growth in the breeding population of bald eagles throughout eastern North America suggests that summering eagles will likely continue to increase on the James for the foreseeable future.

## **BIRD OF THE MONTH**

### **Royal Tern — by Bill Holcomb**

The Royal Tern is a handsome, vigorous looking bird that seems to radiate energy and purpose. It

also has some interesting life style qualities: it mates for life, courtship is highly ritualized and it can drink either salty or fresh water. It is a bird that we see almost every time we take the ferry during warm weather. It seems to be a good bird to talk about.

Terns are members of the gull family of birds and there are 18 tern species in that family. The terns are generally slimmer, are more graceful and are sometimes referred to as "sea swallows." While gulls scavenge off the surface and eat almost anything, terns are live fish eaters and dive beneath the surface to make their catch. Gulls fly with beaks extended forward; terns fly with bills pointing downward. Terns can alight on the surface and float easily but their webbed feet are small, so they are very weak swimmers. Like gulls they are equipped to drink salt water and come with salt glands located above the eyes. These glands extract the salt by means of capillary action. It is excreted as a fluid from the bird's nostrils.

The Royal Tern is a large member of the family, second in size only to the Caspian Tern which it resembles. It is about twenty inches long with about a 43-inch wing span; the wings are slender and pointed and the tail is forked. It is a white bird with a pale gray mantle, a prominent, strong orange beak and a large shock of a black crest that sweeps back from its head in a rather loose form. The forehead is white except for a brief time in the nesting season when the black forehead joins the ragged black crest. This helps to distinguish this bird from the Caspian whose forehead is either black or streaky white. The Caspian's bill is heavier and blood red instead of the bright orange of the Royal. The Royal's tail is more deeply forked. Royal sexes look alike. It has a rasping croak of a call but Terres also mentions a very musical rolling whistle, "ourreeee."

In summer the Royal Tern is found along both ocean coasts and the Gulf coast and along the West African coast. It is a salt water bird that does not usually penetrate very far inland. It feeds by flying about 40 to 60 feet above the surface of the bay or ocean with beak and eyes focused downward. When small fish, shrimp or squid are spotted it hovers briefly and then dives cleanly beneath the surface to grasp its prey. It has been

known to grab fish from a Pelican's pouch and to give up its catch to an attacking frigate bird.

During the mating ritual both birds fly swiftly with fast beating wings and furious vocalizing. At the end of the chase the male offers the female a small fish. Observers believe that mating is for life. Nests are closely packed, simple depressions in the sand, and may frequently be mixed with other terns. One of the largest colonies ever seen included 11,000 nests on coastal Cape Island, SC in 1949. A study on Fisherman Island found a nest every 1 or 2 feet. Nesting grounds are defended vigorously from other birds but quickly deserted when raccoons or mink approach. This may contribute to their preference for isolated sand spits made by tidal action and storms before the nesting season begins.

Two white to pale buff eggs with evenly spaced small dots are most customary in a nest. Incubation is about twenty days and birds fly 28 to 35 days later. Only the female sits the nest. Chicks of the Royal tern gather in a creche. This is a gathering of all of the chicks after they are two or three days old. Both parents feed them. They call their chicks which answer with calls recognized by the parents. They come to the edge of the creche where the parents feed them and then fly off for more food. In 1968 two Royal Terns wintering in Peru were found to be still feeding their chicks months after hatching.

Banding records indicate that the life span can exceed ten years.

The Royal Terns can be found locally at the Scotland Ferry Slips, sitting on pilings near the Chickahominy bridge, at Hog Island and many days at the beach when you are watching the bird activity. This handsome bird is always a pleasure to see.

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

## **HOG ISLAND CLOSINGS**

The Goose Hunting Season at Hog Island runs from September 2 through September 25. During this time the preserve is closed to the non-hunting public each Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday from dawn until 1 p.m. The only day in October closed for hunting is October 16.

## BAKER FEATURED IN PRESS

Paul Baker moved next door to Mitchell Byrd when he settled in Queens Lake in 1965. With that association his birding hobby, started as an Eagle Scout, blossomed into his association with Byrd's raptor banding station on Fisherman Island. Now 92, Baker continued daily raptor banding trips to the island well into his eighties and he was a member of the Williamsburg Bird Club until recent years.

## FIELD NOTES FOR AUGUST

*These Field Notes are based on reports from club members funneled to our record keeper, Bill Sheehan. There has been a sort of normal summer fall off in the reporting but this is a reminder that we can't report information unless we receive it and we ask you to give Bill a call after a good birding day identifying something unusual. We don't normally report resident birds and the very common migrants unless there is something unusual about an early arrival or a very late departure. Your help will be appreciated. Bill's number is 220-2122. Don't hesitate to leave the information on the recorder.*

There were a lot of baffled calls in August from birders confused by molting adults, changing color patterns of birds and strange looking immatures. Seeing birds this time of year that are not identified by any book are problems to be solved with the experience shared by the Becks, Armours, Tabers and Williams of this world. Tony Castillo, keeper of Hog Island, reports the first duck action of the year, "100 or so in small flocks" too far away to identify. Bill Williams had no trouble identifying a white-throated sparrow spotted in the bushes as he came out of the dentist's office. He just could not believe that he was seeing one in August. Our annotated list gives Sept. 30 as the early date. Bill also reported a night hawk seen on the Greensprings Nature Trail. Marilyn Zeigler saw a yellow-crowned night heron near the Queens Lake marina. There have been several reports of wild turkeys on the Bushneck Farm entry road. Bill Sheehan saw a flock of eleven there on his way to pick peaches.

**Jamestown Island/Adjacent Parkway** — Great egret, green heron, turkey vulture, osprey, bald eagle, bobwhite, killdeer, laughing gulls, Caspian tern, royal tern, yellow-billed cuckoo, great horned owl, chimney swift, ruby-throated hummingbird, red-headed woodpecker, wood-pewee, Acadian flycatcher, phoebe, great-crested flycatcher, kingbird, purple martin, tree swallow, barn swallow, fish crow, house wren, marsh wren, blue-gray gnatcatcher, wood thrush, gray catbird, brown thrasher, white-eyed vireo, red-eyed vireo, pine warbler, summer tanager, scarlet tanager, blue grosbeak, indigo bunting.

**Ferry/Hog Island, Chippokes** — Great egret, snowy egret, tri-colored heron, green heron, mute swan, blue-winged teal, black vulture, osprey, bald eagle, cooper's hawk, bobwhite, killdeer, greater yellowlegs, lesser yellowlegs, spotted sandpiper, semipalmated sandpiper, western sandpiper, least sandpiper, white rumped sandpiper, short-billed dowitcher, laughing gull, bonaparte's gull, great black backed gull, Caspian tern, royal tern, common tern, Forster's tern, yellow-billed cuckoo, chimney swift, ruby-throated hummingbird, wood-pewee, phoebe, great-crested flycatcher, kingbird, purple martin, tree swallow, bank swallow, barn swallow, fish crow, blue-gray gnatcatcher, wood thrush, catbird, brown thrasher, white-eyed vireo, red-eyed vireo, pine warbler, blue grosbeak, indigo bunting, chipping sparrow, field sparrow, meadowlark.

**Kingswood** — Black vulture, bald eagle, red-shouldered hawk, yellow-billed cuckoo, chimney swift, ruby-throated hummingbird, wood-pewee, Acadian flycatcher, phoebe, kingbird, purple martin, house wren, blue-gray gnatcatcher, brown thrasher, white-eyed vireo, yellow-throated warbler, pine warbler, summer tanager, scarlet tanager, rufous-sided towhee, chipping sparrow, red-eyed vireo.

**Kingsmill** — Brown pelican, mute swan, black vulture, bald eagle, killdeer, yellow-billed cuckoo, chimney swift, ruby-throated hummingbird, wood-pewee, Acadian flycatcher, phoebe, purple martin, tree swallow, barn swallow, fish crow, house wren, blue-gray gnatcatcher, brown thrasher.