



THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

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December 1999

A Very Merry Christmas

To

All Birders and Feathered Friends

**And, may the Red-breasted Nuthatches,
Evening Grosbeaks, Purple Finches,
Pine Siskins, and Redpolls, both Hoary
And Common, find all of your feeders
To add spice to those great regular guests.**

NEXT MEETING

With all of the competing activity going on, we skip the December meeting and will next meet on Wednesday, January 19, 2000 in Room 117 Millington Hall, William and Mary campus. Dan Cristol has arranged an informative program with some wonderful picture illustrations by Magill Weber entitled "Restoring Sea Bird Islands." She has worked on such projects on the New England coast and will report on the efforts to restore nesting areas for puffins, terns, petrels and other sea birds.

NOVEMBER FIELD TRIP TO YORK RIVER DID WELL

Alex Minarik, on a bright, sunny November 20, led a group of twelve along the Colonial Parkway

starting at College Creek Park and continuing as far as Felsgate on the York River. Starting at College Creek proved a lucky decision as they found a black-crowned night heron there. They also found that common loons, pied-billed grebes, horned grebes, Forster's tern, bufflehead, and ruddy ducks were back on the York River and adjoining waters. Also spotted were some of our returning winter resident song birds, like yellow-bellied sapsucker, brown creeper and ruby-crowned kinglet. A total of 44 birds were identified. Participating in this outing were Joy Archer, Grace and Joe Doyle, Tom Ellis, Mark Meiring, Roy and Phyllis Jennings, Barbara Phieffer, Suzanne Steinke, Chuck Rend, Carol Talbot, Pam Young and Marilyn Zeigler.

100th AUDUBON CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT, DECEMBER 19th

This event provides participants an opportunity to not only continue this long tradition but also to spend a full day in the field from about 7 AM 'till about 4 PM. The Club's assigned section for coverage is a fifteen mile radius from the Colonial Williamsburg Visitor Center, and that has been divided into nine territories. Each territory has an assigned leader. If you are interested in helping to cover one of these territories give the leader a call and arrange a meeting place and time.

Camp Peary	Joe Doyle*	
Cheatham Annex	Bill Williams	229-6095
College Woods	Ruth Beck	221-2217
		(or) 566-8234
Hog Island	Brian Taber	253-1181
Jamestown Island	Dot Silsby*	
Jolly Pond	Lee & Dave Schuster	565-6148
Kingsmill	Tom Armour	229-2363
Mid. Plantation	Hugh Beard	221-0499
Skimino	Bettye Fields	930-0177

*These territories are closed.

If you want to participate, please remember:

7 AM can be quite cold but the day warms up, so plan on wearing layers of clothing.

Bring food and drink that you can leave in a car 'till noon.

Give your leader a break and while in the field forgo social chit chat. What all of these leaders hate is leading a babbling gaggle while searching for birds. The birder next to you will not think that you are anti-social if you do not initiate conversation while looking for birds.

While you move some in cars, you still do a lot of walking and need strong walking footwear. Some kind of a hat makes sense too.

If you can't spend the whole day in the field, tell your leader in advance so arrangements can be made.

Bring five dollars even. That is your fee going to Audubon.

We look for a strong turnout and hope that everyone sees plenty of birds.

FIELD NOTES FOR NOVEMBER

(Resident birds and very common migrants not usually reported.)

Water fowl reports mostly from Hog Island and the York River show a strong November presence. There were reports of **common loons, red-throated loons, pied-billed grebes, horned grebes, tundra swans, snow geese (Little Creek Reservoir), wood ducks, green-winged teal, black ducks, pintails, shovelers, gadwall, American widgeon, canvasback, ringnecks, buffleheads, hooded mergansers, red-breasted mergansers and coot**, all reported in our area. Tom McCary found that water fowl are available right in Williamsburg at the north end of Lake Matoaka. There were about twenty green winged teal, a half dozen gadwalls, three hooded mergansers and a bufflehead, the latter rarely seen on Matoaka or any other body of water here where closeup views are possible. He also saw *and heard* grebes. Tom says they make a whinneying sound (like a horse.) For good measure, he also had a flock of rusty blackbirds.

Hawk reports included **sharp-shinned, Coopers (four reports), red-shouldered, red-tailed and kestrel**.

Winter visiting songbirds include **red-breasted nuthatches** reported by neighbors, Bill Sheehan and Brian Taber, who wonder if they may be sharing a single bird. But Tom McCary has a pair that he has seen a couple of times and hopes they will stay around. A female **purple finch** was seen in Kingswood. **Yellow-bellied sapsuckers and hermit thrushes** are rather widely reported. **Gold crowned and ruby-crowned kinglets** are at Camp Peary, Jamestown and Hog Island. There were no reports of **cedar waxwings**.

On a trip to Hog Island Dan Cristol reports some "notables": **common snipe, American pipits, a yellowthroat and a lesser black-backed gull**.

Paul McAllister birds the Langley Airbase frequently and recently found these notables there: **orange crowned warbler, sharp-tailed sparrow, marsh wren, and swamp sparrow**.

And then there are the warm weather birds that keep showing up; **tree swallows, phoebe, house wren** and strangest of all, a hummingbird reported in Toano by Pat Sgrinia. It was either a **female**

ruby throat or a **rufous hummingbird**. The latter is a rare bird here, with only one confirmed sighting.

Jamestown Is. and nearby Colonial Parkway

Red-throated loon, great egret, mute swan, wood duck, black duck, hooded merganser, red-breasted merganser, Cooper's hawk, Bonaparte's gull, kingfisher, red-headed woodpecker, yellow-bellied sapsucker, tree swallow, fish crow, brown-headed nuthatch, gold-crowned kinglet, ruby-crowned kinglet, pine warbler.

The Ferry, Chippokes and Hog Island

Pied-billed grebe, great egret, tundra swan, mute swan, snow goose, wood duck, green-winged teal, pintail, shoveler duck, gadwall, ringneck duck, bufflehead, hooded merganser, red-breasted merganser, Cooper's hawk, kestrel, killdeer, lesser black-backed gull, Forster's tern, kingfisher, yellow-bellied sapsucker, phoebe, fish crow, house wren, sedge wren, marsh wren, American pipit, gold-crowned kinglet, ruby-crowned kinglet, pine warbler, yellowthroat.

Kingsmill

Pied-billed grebe, mute swan, wood duck, bufflehead, Cooper's hawk, kestrel, Forster's tern.

Kingswood

Sharp-shinned hawk, Cooper's hawk, yellow-bellied sapsucker, red-breasted nuthatch, ruby-crowned kinglet, pine warbler, towhee, purple finch.

Camp Peary

Pied-billed grebe, tundra swan, mute swan, wood duck, green-winged teal, gadwall, American widgeon, canvasback, ring-necked duck, bufflehead, ruddy duck, bald eagle, kestrel, clapper rail, coot, killdeer, kingfisher, phoebe, golden-crowned kinglet, ruby-crowned kinglet, towhee, field sparrow, junco, meadowlark.

York River and nearby Colonial Parkway

(See November field trip.)

YOU MAY WANT TO GIVE YOUR FEEDER BIRDS EGG SHELLS

The Cornell Lab started the Birds and Calcium Project in 1997 when convincing observations

indicated that some birds were not obtaining sufficient calcium to produce their own egg shells and to feed their young. The affects of acid rain seem to have interfered with the birds' natural supply of calcium. In any event, the results of the study clearly indicate that people with bird feeders can help by crushing the eggshells we're throwing away and putting them out where the birds can get them.

The 680 participants in the study group offered crushed eggshells on the ground and on platform feeders. The birds which seemed to prefer the ground method were thrushes, wrens, blackbirds, doves, swallows and crows and jays. Preference for platform feeding was shown by woodpeckers, nuthatches, titmice, chickadees, finches, grosbeaks, cardinals, and buntings. In most instances the best results were obtained by placing the egg shells in both places.

If you try this, it would be interesting if you would share the results at a meeting. This is also an ongoing study and the Cornell lab will welcome you as a participant.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM FEEDER WATCH PROGRAM '98-'99

Highlights of this Feeder Watch Program were reported in the Autumn issue of the Cornell Lab's newsletter, *Birdscope*. Among them were: huge flocks of American robins roaming the northern states in the dead of winter, a western irruption of pine siskins, and the continued expansion of blue jay populations westward.

Typically, only small numbers of robins tough out the cold at the northern edge of the species winter range. The large nomadic flocks typically occur farther south. The difference last winter is illustrated by a report from La Crosse, Wisconsin. "On a zero day in mid-January, I saw a half dozen robins at my heated bird bath and more than a hundred waiting their turn in nearby trees." The last heavy population of winter robins in the northern climes was '94-'95 but the continuing trend clearly indicates an increasing abundance of winter robins in North Central, South Central, New England and Mid-Atlantic states.

Pine Siskins skipped most feeders in the East and staged an irruption on the western front to the

delight of many western bird watchers. Flocks of a hundred were seen at Vancouver feeders. A report from Wyoming says, “flocks of 75 to a hundred seemed to be traveling with evening grosbeaks, American goldfinches, and red-breasted nuthatches. (Eat your hearts out, Virginians! Ed.)

Even though the western expansion of blue jay territory is not new to ornithology, the number of comments by surprised folks in the western states indicates that it is still a new and exciting phenomenon for many folks. A woman in Utah says, “It seems that last winter’s blue jays returned this year—and each one brought two friends with him!”

Further, the Feeder Watch project leader says that the Central and Eastern United States should be in for an invasion of northern finches this winter. We should also be on the lookout for pine grosbeaks, red crossbills, white-winged crossbills, common redpolls, hoary redpolls, pine siskins and evening grosbeaks. (What a treat, if it happens! Ed.)

The Cornell lab is always seeking to expand this feeder watch program and we printed the application form last summer, but if you need one call Bill Holcombe or Phil Young. By the way, the Great Back Yard Bird Count that several of our members enjoyed last year will be repeated in February. More on that later.

BIRD OF THE MONTH

Long-billed Marsh Wren by Bill Holcombe

After Paul McAllister told me about finding a long-billed marsh wren in the salt water marsh at the Langley Airbase, I looked up this tiny creature and found another fascinating little bird.

There are 59 wren species in the world and all but one are found only in the Western Hemisphere. The lone exception is the winter wren. It is believed that this tiny bird spread from Alaska to Asia to Africa and eventually to Europe where it is known simply as “The Wren.” In North America there are ten wren species.

The long-billed marsh wren, also known simply as the “marsh wren,” may be found in all parts of the continental United States and the southern parts of Canada in marshy environments. This 4 ½ to 5

½-inch long bird has brown upper parts, a darker cap, a long slender bill with black and white streaks on the back, a prominent white stripe over each eye and whitish under parts. It lives in cattail marshes, bull rushes, tall marsh grass or tidal creeks and brackish marshes. It is resident along the coasts and is also migratory, with summer ranges in the upper United States and southern Canada. It winters along the southern fringe of the country, mostly in the Gulf States.

The male is a strong singer who fills the song with trills, gurgles, rattles and ends abruptly in a short musical trill. He sometimes rises straight up in the air from his place deep in the reed beds singing as he rises and falls back. He sings at night as well as during the day. He can attract one mate or sometimes several at the same time. While the female builds the nest to be used, the male builds as many as six dummy nests in the same general vicinity. He does this for each nesting female that he has mated with. The female lashes together supporting cattails or bull rushes and then weaves an outer wall of strips of coarse, water-soaked cattails, leaving an opening on one side. She then weaves an inside layer of grasses, rootlets, and cattails and lines the central cavity with shredded plants and feathers. If the nesting couple is disturbed by red-winged black birds or least bitterns nesting in the same marsh, the male may seek out their nests and eat or puncture their eggs.

The female wren usually lays five to six eggs. They are a dull brown evenly covered by dots of darker brown. She does the incubating for thirteen to sixteen days. The young fly in about sixteen days.

Our club’s annotated list calls this bird an uncommon migrant and rare breeder but there have been some reports in every month of the year. The marshes on Jamestown Island and Hog Island are likely places to find them, in fact, one was seen at Hog Island this past month.

References include The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds by John Terres and A Field Guide to the Birds East of the Rockies by Roger Tory Peterson