



THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

Volume 24, Number 9

October 2000

NEXT MEETING

The next meeting of the Williamsburg Bird Club will take place on Wednesday, October 18 at 7:30 p.m. in Room 117, Millington Hall, William & Mary campus. Program Director Dan Cristol has arranged for Virginia Power's wildlife biologist to address the problem of bird electrocutions and other power line-bird issues. This is the second presentation in the series of three dealing with the negative impacts upon bird life of civilization's threatening structures.

THREE LOVELY DAYS AT CHINCOTEAGUE

By Marilyn Zeigler

Three days of beautiful summer weather were to grace the VSO field trip to Chincoteague, September 8-10. Crossing the Bay with Joy Archer, we checked the tunnel islands for birds. Down on the rocks were a few Black Terns, some Sanderlings and a Ruddy Turnstone. An immature Yellow-crowned Night Heron surprised us, standing stock-still among the rocks. I practiced sorting tern's heads: all Common Terns here and then later on, Forster's Terns on the Assateague Island bridge. Many boats were lingering near the bridge, presumably to pursue rockfish.

Several cars stopping on the islands carried knowledgeable VSO folks heading in our direction. Among them was Larry Lynch, now VSO President. At Kiptopeke, lacking a cold front, hawks were sparse. Across the way at the national Wildlife Refuge, Glossy Ibis probed a now grassy pond. A nice group of immature White Ibis perched next to a wetter pond where Tri-

colored Herons waded. Interestingly, the Williamsburg Kiptopeke Challenge team saw the White Ibis there a week later.

Choosing to follow Richmond birders up a scenic byway paralleling Rt.13, we stopped at two fields temporarily flooded. The main attractions among the waders were a Hudsonian Godwit and an American Golden Plover that had retained much of his summer coloration. A Pectoral Sandpiper also joined the gang. Further north at the charming hamlet of Willis Wharf, flocks of Bobolinks and Tree Swallows passed overhead.

Chincoteague's housing was tight and we ended up at The Mariner in a room heavy with mildew, not recommended though regrettably, still on the VSO list. But a bright new day dawned, with Jerry Via leading a group on the warbler (Woodland) Trail, now marked by many trees dying from pine bark beetle infestation. Our warblers were only three, Pine, Black-and-white and Redstart. There was a fine long look at a Brown-headed Nuthatch posing in good light and a Baltimore Oriole.

A Green Heron flushed in the marsh. We continued to the late morning walk on the Wildlife Trail that takes you past Snow Goose Pool, led by Bill Akers. Great sweeps of flats dotted by pools provide habitat for many shorebirds, swimming, wading and walking. A Wilson's Phalarope was doing its stuff way out there. Joy saw a Red Knot but I was unable to spot the bird. Black Skimmers stood close by on their improbable little red legs. There was an intense discussion among some birders about whether a Short-billed Dowitcher might just have been a Long-billed. Suddenly a flock of birds would swirl into the air as a Peregrine made a pass into their midst. Not having my own scope, I wandered further along the path,

spotting a previously-reported immature Moorhen, obscurely hanging out along a bank.

In mid-afternoon with about 40 others Joy and I squeezed onto an ancient Safari vehicle, three-to-a-seat with screened windows and quivering sides, that was drawn by a truck. Very deliberately we all moved down a gated road, again led by Bill Akers. At first there was thick vegetation and then we moved onto an open spit with flats on either side, where we disgorged with all of the scopes. Plenty to see if you had a scope, like a Bald Eagle on distant open ground. Bill Akers is always generous with viewing, having chosen a scope with eyepieces accommodating short or tall viewers. A Sharp-shinned Hawk flashed overhead looking for prey among many terns and skimmers. We had also seen two bucks with antlers along the way. Clusters of vari-colored ponies observed curiously as the Safari moved by. One stallion well known to the bus driver stood with his family group of nine mares and a couple of colts. Main roads on the island have signs warning not to feed ponies, which can kick and bite. No problem with observation.

Former VSO President, Ruth Beck brought three students, Renae Held, Matt Smith and David Desrochers to the count late Saturday. Renae had led the August Craney Island field trip in Ruth's absence. Ruth reported 121 VSO participants in the weekend, including a couple from New York and a visiting Turkish ornithologist. Dinner with Ruth's entourage was a special treat with her mother and son Michael included.

Next morning there were more Skimmers and Boat-tailed Grackles near the beach and waders by the road: Lesser Yellowlegs, Semipalmated, Western and White-rumped Sandpipers. Down the highway on a tunnel island, a cormorant silhouette seemed hefty to me. Sure enough, another VSO car pulled up, checked the rocks with their scope, and we all saw a Great Cormorant with white throat strap, comparing it with a nearby Double-crested Cormorant. Thumbs up for the weekend!

FIELD NOTES FOR SEPTEMBER

Field reports from right around Williamsburg were very sparse in September, even though Bill Williams started off with a couple of very good

ones. Sept. 3 he saw an olive-sided flycatcher on the Green Spring Trail in back of the high school, which was only the 3rd area sighting and the first fall sighting. On September 8, Bill wrote, "A singing blue-headed vireo outside my office window this glorious morning made it seem more like spring!"

Grace and Joe Doyle summarize their weekly visits to CAMP PEARY with this monthly report: "Highlights: Sept. 3 **yellow warbler** and **prairie warbler**, Sept. 18, **redstart** and **black and white warbler**. Sept. 24, **prairie warbler**. Monthly total: **great egret, green-backed heron, osprey, bald eagle, red-tailed hawk, American kestrel, killdeer, lesser yellowlegs, common tern, red-throated hummingbird, belted kingfisher, red-headed woodpecker, eastern wood-pewee, Acadian flycatcher, brown-headed nuthatch, gray catbird, brown thrasher, red-eyed vireo, common yellowthroat, summer tanager, blue grosbeak.**

From the VSO e-mail net: CRANEY ISLAND, Baird sandpiper, bald eagle, whimbrel, American golden plovers, black-bellied plovers, black terns, black skimmers and bobolink. Plus, "probably three to 5,000 sandpiper-like birds in the south impoundment that I couldn't scope out because of the bulldozers working the dike."

Many of you who remember Brian Pattison's programs about pelagic birding (sea birds) will enjoy this report from Ned Brinkley in a VSO report describing a September 18th pelagic trip out of Virginia Beach with Brian. (I am forced to trim this report quite a bit because of its length, a shame, as it is so vividly and sharply written that I wish I had been there. Ed.)

"It was a fine trip with good weather and good company. We departed Lynhaven Inlet at 5:30 a.m. arriving in deeper water to bird by 10:30 and seeking the warmest water that we could find. This was about 15 miles south of Norfolk Canyon.

A relatively uneventful ride out saw a handful of gulls, a first winter Lesser Black-backed Gull, a few Phalaropes shot past, and a few migrating passerines: Baltimore Oriole, several unidentified warblers, a Common Yellowthroat that rode back to the dock with us after chasing insects across our shoes, an American Redstart, a Great Blue Heron, a teal of some sort, a Green Damer and a

Thrush in the water (probably Swainson).

A few Bottlenose Dolphin rode in to inspect us as we reached deeper water. The first pelagic bird was a Bridled Tern riding on a board. This was followed by many Wilson's Storm-Petrels. Then the birds came fast and furiously: a sitting flock of Cory's Shearwaters, Audubon's Shearwaters appeared and a large flock of Greater Shearwaters. In the first half hour of birding we'd had four species of tubenose! But it was the call of "Manx, Manx Shearwater" from Brian Patteson on the bridge that got pulses racing. There was no fall record of this species off of Virginia but by the end of the day we'd seen eleven. Skipjack Tuna were feeding all over the place and Shearwaters raced around after the small bait fish driven to the surface. The results were often comical and the nasal braying cries of the Corys and Greater Shearwaters were a pleasure to hear.

A Pomarine Jaeger popped out of a flock of Shearwaters, and then another, and another and another! A Parasitic Jaeger began harassing two juvenile Long-tailed Jaegers—a graceful dog-fight if there ever was one. Then a Sooty Tern appeared off of the bow with shouts from the spotter and then we were watching an adult and a very sooty juvenile. Patteson and I had never seen this species off of Virginia.

We were overwhelmed by bird numbers and hardly knew which direction to look, with birds everywhere. Off in the distance I saw a flock of Shearwaters with what seemed an improbable number of Jaegers in attendance. But was that size a Jaeger? Skuas! We approached and found not one but three South Polar Skuas amongst the chaos of birds. These obliged us by flying around the boat and OVERHEAD! This was a life bird and a state bird for many on board.

Heading back we saw Atlantic Bottlenose and Atlantic Spotted Dolphins, four Loggerhead Sea Turtles and what appeared to be a breaching Mako Shark. Sandwich, Royal, Forster's, and Common Terns greeted us as we neared home, along with a volley of Brown Pelicans. A Northern Gannet, the first of the season, passed Cape Henry on the way into the bay, our last sea bird of the trip."

Ned concludes by pointing out that this wonderful trip was almost scrubbed for lack of interest. "I just can't imagine that any birder wouldn't enjoy

seeing the first few pages of the field guide come to life as they do off shore there in September during the autumn sea bird migration." *And he makes a plea for more local birders to become involved and enjoy the excitement of pelagic birding, so unique and so close at hand. Ed.*

SUCCESSFUL ACTION TO SAVE THE HORSESHOE CRABS

Larry Lynch, President of the VSO, thanks everyone who wrote letters and helped to expedite this action. He quotes a New York Times wire story announcing the plans to establish an 1,800-square mile sanctuary from Delaware Bay out into the Atlantic to protect the rapidly dwindling stock of horseshoe crabs that are vital to the pharmaceutical industry and to the annual migration of dozens of species of shorebirds. The story also points out that Commerce Secretary Mineta ordered the state of Virginia to join the other Atlantic states in recognizing an emergency in the horseshoe crab population. Virginia must either voluntarily reduce its catch significantly or find the state's industry shut down by Federal order when the government's proposal for the sanctuary takes effect. This action is expected in October. "Virginia has been strip mining horseshoe crabs," declared Daniel P. Beard, vice president the National Audubon Society.

While Virginia has been singled out as a renegade state in this matter, officials in Virginia maintain that they have gone it alone, not because of pressure from the crab bait industry, but because the other Atlantic States' voluntary quotas are too severe to be justified by the current scientific research.

Scientists say their research has shown a 90% decline in horseshoe crabs in the last ten years. That raises concern for the crab's preservation and for the survival of the one million shore birds that rely on excess crab eggs as food for the final leg of their migration from South America to the Arctic.

THANK YOU! TO KIPTOPEKE CHALLENGE SUPPORTERS

By Brian Taber

Our team of Tom Armour, Fenton Day, Brian Taber and Bill Williams began the day, September 16, at 4:30 a.m. in hopes of hearing barred Owls in Williamsburg. Hearing none, we headed for the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel. There we found strong northwest winds from the passing cold front and all the expected gulls and terns. A nice bonus was two sparrows, Seaside and Salt-marsh Sharp-tail.

Then, because of the wind, we decided to concentrate on sunny wood lots in sheltered areas. The bunker trail at the Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge provided the perfect spot and we found eight of the day's 13 warbler species in short order, including a bird new to the six years of the count, a Yellow-breasted Chat. One of the Refuge ponds attracted most of the expected herons and egrets, including more than a dozen White Ibis.

At the boardwalk trail at Kiptopecke State Park, also out of the wind, we added a Least Flycatcher and Eastern Screech Owl. The harbor town of Oyster produced Black Skimmers and Marbled Godwits. Shore birds were plentiful, though often distant, at Chincoteague and we tallied twenty species, including several Hudsonian Godwits and a very close Buff-breasted Sandpiper. The flocks were repeatedly scattered by Merlins and Peregrines.

As always, a number of short stops and some good luck, helped fill in the gaps in our list. We ended the day at the Chincoteague Woodland Trail and found a bird that our team had not encountered before in this event. It was a fast flying silhouette, at dusk, of either a Whip-poor-will or Chuck-will's-widow.

We won the competition with 134 species, just short of last year's total of 138. And that's without Blue jay, Yellow-throated Warbler, Pied-billed Grebe and Chimney Swift which some team members saw, but were not allowed because of the rules that say 95% of the species must be seen by all team members and no birds are allowed if seen by only one team member.

Fenton and Brian stayed until the next morning and quickly found a dozen species of birds that had not been seen during the competition, which demonstrates the great diversity of the area at this season.

Thanks again to all of our supporters. All funds help to enhance the many projects of the Coastal Virginia Wildlife Observatory. We're already looking forward to next year!

Anyone interested in membership in the Observatory may send a check payable to CVWO, to P.O. Box 11, Franktown, VA 23354. Members receive two newsletters a year. Membership categories are: Students \$15, Individual \$20, Family \$35, Sustaining \$50, Benefactor \$100, Patron \$250, Life \$500.

The National Audubon Society **"SIBLEY GUIDE TO BIRDS"**

A New Field Guide by David Allen Sibley \$35.

Many of the comments about this books say that there are plenty of good field guides around, but this is apparently something very special. Pete Dunne, author of numerous books and director of the New Jersey Audubon Society's Cape May Observatory, says, "David has just raised the bar. This book represents the high-water mark of field guides."

Simon Perkins, field ornithologist for the Massachusetts Audubon Society, calls the book, "a quantum leap."

Each species is depicted in a clear and easy to understand way with multiple illustrations starting with the flying bird viewed from above and below, an extremely useful feature for birders who often deal with overhead birds at migratory hot spots. Each species is also shown in juvenile, immature, male and female plumage, both ordinary and breeding and to a degree that other guides do not attempt.

Birds, specifically sketching, drawing and painting them, have been the central theme for Mr. Sibley's life from as far back as he remembers. He began observing birds when he was seven and by twelve was photographing birds in the hand, sketching birds and had already amassed an impressive volume of data.

“David is one of the supreme field birders in the United States,” said Dr. Noble S. Proctor, a professor of ornithology at Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven and an author of an ornithological textbook. That skill as a field observer, married with his gifts as an artist, has given the guide a distinctive, personal feel. This field guide is the way that Mr. Sibley wanted it, envisioned it and shaped it in more than a decade of work. It is the guide that he always wished that he could see.

Expert birders who have seen the book call it a must-have guide for anyone interested in birds.

This review was extracted from one appearing on the Audubon e-mail Service. The book may be ordered at The College Book Store.