



THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

Volume 25, Number 2

February 2001

NEXT MEETING

This month's speaker will be Martin Lowney, Virginia State Director for Wildlife Services for the US Department of Agriculture. He has expertise in many areas of controversy involving birds, including expanding Cormorant populations and their effects on fisheries, aircraft-bird collisions, cat predation and, of course, our old favorite, non-migrant Canada Geese. His talk and slide show will be entitled "Managing One Wildlife Species to Protect Another; How Did We Get Into This Predicament?" This will be the last in our series of speakers on problems faced by birds.

FIELD TRIP TO BAY-BRIDGE IS.

PLEASE NOTE: The date of this trip is Saturday, February 17. It is the week **before** the February meeting rather than the usual Saturday **after** the meeting. Bill Williams will lead this trip but was not able to make it for the following Saturday.

There have been interesting reports from the islands and while things can change awfully fast when you're somewhere between the Bay and the Atlantic Ocean, there are always great possibilities. Purple Sandpipers and both kinds of Cormorants have been common on the rocks. Other possibilities include Harlequin Ducks, Long-tailed Ducks, Bufflehead, the Eider Ducks and one or more of the Scoters and Mergansers. Surprises happen with some frequency on these islands. For example, last year we saw a quite rare Black-tailed Gull.

Plan for cold weather — this is usually a "long-john" trip. You'll also need some lunch. And a thermos full of something warm will likely be

welcome. We will assemble for this trip at the **Monticello Shopping Center in front of Wild Birds Unlimited** at 7:15 a.m. and plan to depart by 7:30. We will probably be back by 2 p.m. Car loads will share the gasoline and toll expenses.

TRUMPETER SWANS & SHORT-EARED OWLS by Bill Holcombe

After hearing about the Trumpeter Swans at Stuart's Draft over in the Shenandoah Valley and the Short-eared Owls near Zion's Crossroads, fifteen miles this side of Charlottesville, we decided to go look for these two as additions to the life list. It turned out that Alex Minarik was thinking the same thing. But that morning it didn't look like everyone going could fit into one car so we agreed to look for one another "out there." As reports on the e-mail bird line indicated that 4:30 was a good arrival time for the owls, we didn't leave town until after noon. Unexpectedly, we ended up leaving with no passenger except our yellow lab.

Somehow it amazes me when I'm following directions posted by someone I don't even know, that the noted landmarks appear right in front of me. There in Stuart's Draft was "The Cheese Shop" and to the right was Route 521. Then, 300 yards on, *there* was the farm pond. While I could see Mallards and domestic geese in the ponds, there was no sign of the Trumpeters. Despite the mooing cow that did not seem to like my invading her turf, I moved up close to the fence and strained to see a hidden corner of the pond. Then, suddenly, up popped this great long white neck with a massive black bill and a large black eye attached. As they moved around a bit both Swans

came into view. Having studied my guidebooks, I was relieved to see no yellow where the corner of the bill and the eye come close together, and to see that the line formed by the top of the bill was a curve rather than a straight line. These were Trumpeters and not Tundras! I felt a thrill of satisfaction.

From there we followed directions to where the Horned Larks and Lapland Longspurs had been reported. My twenty minute search revealed two hovering Kestrels and two robin-sized dark birds that will always remain a mystery. I am not sure whether Alex, who had recruited Marilyn Ziegler as a passenger, reached the Trumpeters before or after me, but she had much better luck in the follow on. She found Horned Larks and a White-crowned Sparrow to boot!

About 45 minutes later I arrived at the Zion's Crossroad location, found the second "big white house with a large pond just beyond it," and found four other cars waiting for the Short-eared Owls. The birders were from Hampton, Richmond and Charlottesville. At about 4:45 Alex and Marilyn arrived and at that moment numerous Short-eared Owls rose up from around the pond. The Owls immediately went after two Northern Harriers perched nearby, one on a fence post and one in the middle of a field. The great long owl wings with the honey-colored undercoat tipped in black flashed and soared around the Harriers which were joined by a third. If you couldn't see the white rump on the Harriers, it was sometimes difficult to tell which bird you were watching in this avian dog-fight. After ten minutes of intense activity the owls and at least one Harrier began perching on fence posts. Gradually the flying owls settled down and so we were able to spend ten minutes or so studying them at rest. They were a warm, pretty brown and the long wings folded back behind them looked at first glance like black tails. You could tell that you were looking at an owl's face, but we were too far away to see eyes distinctly. And even with scopes we never saw the "short ears." But as the gentleman next to us from Charlottesville said, "That was the most satisfying half hour of birding that I've encountered in a long time."

P.S. I just learned that Trumpeter Swans, identified by green collars, are *not* life-list birds as they

were raised in captivity and released as part of a reintroduction plan coordinated by Environmental Studies at Airlie, Va. More of them have arrived on the upper Chesapeake and we will just have to wait for their offspring to appear.

We've printed directions before, but if you need them again call me at 229-9857.

BILL SHEEHAN MEMORIAL

As we are close to the anniversary of Bill's death, it is a good time to remind those many Bird Club members who remember him with great pleasure, that a plan for a memorial has been settled and that donations to purchase it are invited. If you didn't know Bill, maybe you will still want to honor this early member of the Williamsburg Bird Club. He did much to establish the club and make it into what we have today. He kept the meticulous bird sighting records for over twenty years that made possible the printing of the Club's "Annotated List of the Birds of the Williamsburg Virginia Area" in 1997. He served coffee to hundreds of birders who visited his kitchen to watch the yard full of birds that were attracted to his feeders and plantings, and to listen to his intelligent, always witty and sometimes acerbic comments on a wide range of things that interested him. In a year we simply haven't been able to replace what he contributed to *The Flyer* and to birding in Williamsburg.

A park bench with a fitting recognition plate will be positioned at the Biology Department's field extension area, just beyond the Law School, where bird banding and student fieldwork take place. A picnic table will be added if enough extra money can be raised. The bench itself, installed, will cost us about \$1,000. It will be weather resistant, anchored to prevent vandalism and suitably handsome to honor Bill. Several other locations were considered and eliminated for one reason or another.

Mail your contribution to the Williamsburg Bird Club, P.O. Box 1085, Williamsburg, VA 23187. The check should be drawn payable to Williamsburg Bird Club. Also, please attach a note indicating it is for the Bill Sheehan Fund. We now have a start of over \$300 from donations received last year.

RESTORING TRUMPETER SWANS TO VIRGINIA WATERS

From material found at <http://trumpeterswan.org>

The Trumpeter Swans appearing in Virginia and, within the last few days, in the upper Chesapeake, are the result of a program to reintroduce them coordinated by Environmental Studies at Airlie near Warrenton, Va.

The swans that we are now seeing were raised from incubator chicks at Airlie and then taken to a facility near Buffalo, New York where they were trained to follow ultra-light aircraft. In late fall they follow that aircraft, as seen in the movie Fly Away Home, to wintering grounds of the Wild-fowl Trust of North America near Easton, Md. The third group just arrived at those wintering grounds after a very long trip much delayed by strong snow storms.

Experience to date has not yet proven that these birds will be migratory and a change in plan will be tested for the fourth year. The plan is to gather a hundred wild chicks at about ten days old from nesting grounds in Alaska. Those chicks will then be brought to Airlie and exposed to ultra-light aircraft as they develop. Then at fledging time they will be taken to an airfield near Buffalo N.Y. where they will be trained to follow the ultra-lights. In the fall they too, will be led to Maryland. The hope is that these chicks of wild birds will be more readily migratory. Our Tundra Swans migrate from Alaska to this part of the world every year in one of the longest North American migratory treks.

The Trumpeter Swan, which in appearance and life style is similar to the Tundra Swan, weighs 25 to 30 pounds and is the largest migrating bird in North America. The Tundra Swan averages closer to 18 pounds. This may help to explain why the Trumpeter was hunted almost to extinction two hundred years ago. There are now only an estimated 14,000 of them, compared to nearly 180,000 Tundra Swans.

The plan at Airlie is not only to restore a migrating population of Trumpeter Swans to the East Coast but to imprint a migration route on the birds that will give them the safest possible round trip between northern nesting grounds and East Coast wintering grounds.

All birders can join in a fervent wish for the success of this project. Should you like to make a financial contribution to the effort, you can send a check made out to "Trumpeter Swan Project" to D. Rininger, Environmental Studies, 7078 Airlie Road, Warrenton, Va. 20187. Any contribution over \$25 will get you on their mailing list.

I have unsuccessfully tried to contact the folks at Airlie to ascertain for certain that the green-tagged Trumpeter Swans at Stuart's Draft are from their operation. I assume that they are but have not confirmed it. — Bill Holcombe

RAINY BUT SUCCESSFUL JANUARY TRIP

Despite the drizzly weather on January 20, five persistent birders went searching waterfowl on the York River. They found them. The list includes ten Common Loons off the Yorktown Beach and one each Double-crested and Great Cormorants. The inlet waters away from the river contained ten Tundra Swans, Mallards, six Hooded Mergansers and two Red-breasted Mergansers, plus the usual Canada Geese. On the river was one Long-tailed Duck (not seen there very often,) ten Goldeneyes, lots of Buffleheads and a surprisingly small number of Ruddy Ducks. Gulls included six Bonapartes. For good measure, they spotted 25 Cedar Waxwings and a Black Vulture.

The hardy group included Joy Archer, Herbert and Beverly Spanuth, and Marilyn Ziegler, all under the guidance of Tom Armour.

FIELD NOTES FOR JANUARY

(The notes reflect reported seasonal and unusual bird sightings.)

January 1 Ruth Beck reported two Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers.

January 2 Ruth had lots of birds: two Brown Creepers, a female Purple Finch, a pair of Hairy Woodpeckers, a Bald Eagle, a Red-shouldered Hawk, a Barred Owl, a Great Horned Owl, two Wild Turkeys, both Kinglets and a Pine Warbler.

Scattered all through January Bill Holcombe had Ruby-crowned Kinglets and Yellow-rumped Warblers fighting the Downey Woodpeckers for

the suet cake and a Hermit Thrush eating holly berries.

January 16 Bill's backyard had a Brown Creeper and a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker.

January 17 Tom and Jean Armour at Hog Island found 88 Tundra Swans, 150 Green-winged Teal, nine Northern Pintails, 45 Ring-necked Ducks.

January 27 at Chippokes, Tom Armour and Joy Archer found a huge flock of Ruddy Ducks on the James estimated at 5,000 and a somewhat surprising four Chipping Sparrows. Continuing to Hog Island got them a Horned Lark, a Kestrel, ten Pintail Ducks, twenty Ring-necked Ducks and 300 Green-winged Teal plus four Bald Eagles.

January 28 Tom found a Phoebe in his yard — a whiff of Spring!

January 29 Bill Holcombe spotted a Great Horned Owl in his yard.

Camp Peary — In four visits during the month by Grace and Joe Doyle they saw: Tundra Swan, Mute Swan, Canvasback, Ring-necked Duck, Bufflehead, Hooded Merganser, Red-breasted Merganser, Ruddy Duck, Bald Eagle, Northern Harrier, Northern Bobwhite, Kildeer, Belted Kingfisher, Red-headed Woodpecker, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Brown-headed Nuthatch, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Hermit Thrush, Cedar Waxwing, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Pine Warbler, Eastern Towhee and Chipping Sparrow. They had a high count on their ventures of 46 species and a low of 36.

Elsewhere in Virginia — Some unusual bird sightings continued to be reported on the Audubon-VSO e-mail network and there was steady comment about unusually large flocks of Robins seen throughout the state.

The Snowy Owl at Cape Lookout was last reported January 5 but on January 19 another one appeared closer to here in Petersburg. The spotter had seen the one at Point Lookout and was sure that this was a different bird, but very likely the same one reported seen at the Richmond Airport late last year. The Petersburg owl is on the property of the Federal Prison inside the new construction gate. It can be seen from the road outside. Larry Lynch warns that birders entering the grounds without permission may be the next object of our visits to the prison! The prison is

located on River Road.

January 16 brought another report of the Loggerhead Shrike in Fauquier County in the same area seen previously late last year.

January 21 turned up a report of a Yellow-breasted Chat that displayed itself "very nicely and for some time" on the walk along the canal.

FEB. 16 TO 19, THE GREAT BACK YARD BIRD COUNT OF 2001

As a participant in this event you can have some fun and participate in a piece of worthwhile ornithology science. The event is sponsored by The Lab at Cornell University, the outstanding bird science organization in the United States.

Here is what you do: For each day of the count in which you plan to participate, keep track of the birds that visit your back yard and adjacent property. Otherwise, pick a more productive place that you can monitor easily. You need to record the species and the greatest number of that species that you observe at any one time, so you avoid repeatedly counting the same returning bird. Keep separate reports for each day of the count. You can report on a single day or on all four. There is no minimum time that you must do your observing but you must declare the amount of time spent.

Your report must be filed through the Cornell lab web site at <http://birds.cornell.edu>. The site is organized in a very user-friendly manner for reporting. If you don't have access to the internet you can mail a written-report (showing the day, the species, the largest number of each species and the total hours and fractions thereof you spent watching) to Bill Holcombe, 4705 Lady Slipper Path, Williamsburg 23185. Alternatively, drop it off in my newspaper box or call it in to me on the phone. I believe that Wild Birds Unlimited is also again filing reports that are dropped off there.

This will be the fourth annual event. The number of participants has risen dramatically, increasing the value of the report as a mid-winter snapshot of where the birds are. *The Flyer* would like to report on how Club members respond and we'd appreciate a call or a note telling me that you did take part and for how many days.

CLUB ADDS ONE NEW SPECIES TO AREA COUNT

Brian Taber and Bill Williams increased the species identified in our area by one during the past year. On August 12 they were birding Hog Island when a Lark Sparrow made its appearance for the first time in 23 years of club records. 326 species had been recorded by 1997 when the 20th Anniversary of the Club was celebrated by publishing "Birds of the Williamsburg Virginia Area, An Annotated List." The new figure can no longer be verified by that prince of record keepers, Bill Sheehan, but we believe that number is now 327.

FINANCIAL REPORT

At the organizational meeting of the Club's executive committee held prior to last month's meeting, Treasurer Charles Rend presented a financial report for the year 2000. The Total Income of \$3,768.23 was somewhat inflated by the inclusion of some funds collected for the Bill Sheehan Memorial Fund and a delayed payment from Wild Birds Unlimited. Accordingly, it more than amply covered our expenses of \$3,055.81. The major expense items are \$878 for printing and mailing *The Flyer*, two student research grants of \$500 each and the Blue Bird Trail Project \$442. Contributions were made to The Nature Conservancy, \$50; Williamsburg Regional Library for the purchase of bird books, \$170; Center for Conservation Biology, \$100; Coastal Virginia Wildlife Observatory (a.k.a. K.E.S.T.R.E.L.) \$100; Toano Middle School Bird Watch Program, \$50; Williamsburg Land Conservancy, \$50; and dues to Virginia Society of Ornithologists, \$25. For the year 2001 the contribution to Center for Conservation Biology was distributed to The Nature Conservancy and to The American Bird Conservancy.