



# THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

Volume 25, Number 11

December 2001

*The Williamsburg Bird Club Wishes all of you a very Merry Christmas*

**and a year of excellent birding in 2002 !**

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## **NEXT MEETING**

There is no meeting of the club in December. The Club will next meet on the third Wednesday of January, the 16<sup>th</sup>. Details of the meeting will appear in the January Flyer.

## **YORK RIVER FIELD TRIP**

While the balmy April weather that continued into Dec. 1 limited the ducks on the York River to 300 Ruddy Ducks and 50 Bufflehead, the day had some very nice compensations. A real highlight came from the twenty Northern Gannet and over a hundred Brown Pelicans actively fishing the river at Yorktown, the gannets with their smooth, penetrating dives and the pelicans with their usual splashing crashes. Another was the group of 21 Loons near the Yorktown Beach, one of them a Red-throated Loon. The others were Common Loons. There were three Pied-billed Grebes and two Horned Grebes on the river and two Tundra Swans in the inlet waters, rounded out by two Bald Eagles above. There were five gull species including one Bonaparte's Gull and ten Forster's Terns. Songbirds included Cedar Waxwing and Common Yellowthroat. A total of thirty-six

species were identified.

Tom Armour led 15 participants on this trip. They included Hugh Beard, Bill and Betty Ann Caldwell, Al and Meg Karb, Carolyn Lowe, Charles Rend, Kathy and Ken Sage, Judy Stein and Hugh Beard's four students: Hugh Hart, Justin Heath, Lauren Rasmussen and Randi Ryan.

## **CHRISTMAS BIRD CNT. DEC. 16**

To participate in this 102nd Christmas Bird Count call one of the following leaders and arrange a meeting place and time. Our 15-mile circle, centered on the C.W. Visitor Reception Area, is divided into nine sections. The sections with the leader responsible are as follows: Cheatham Annex, Bill Williams, 229-6095; Camp Peary, Tom Armour (participation limited); Skimino, Bettye Fields, 930-0177; Jolly Pond, Lee Schuster, 565-6148; Middle Plantation, Hugh Beard, 221-0499; Jamestown Island, Dot Silsby, 596-3252; College Woods, Ruth Beck, 221-2217; Hog Island, Brian Taber, 253-1181. Usually these groups start in the field at about 7 a.m. and bird until about 4 p.m. If you plan to participate for the whole day, bring a lunch and something to drink. It is hard to know what the weather will be like by

then but it can be cold early in the morning and wearing layered clothing usually makes sense. You are usually in and out of cars so you'll have a place to leave things.

Birders are welcome on almost any bird count and some of the nearby counts can offer another good day in the field. Here are some that aren't too far away: Back Bay, Dec. 29, contact Paul Sykes, 706-769-9436; Cape Charles, Dec.30 ( which usually produces the highest species count in the state,) contact Harry Armistead, 215-248-4120; Chesapeake Bay, Dec. 26, contact Ned Brinkley, 757-331-2483; Dismal Swamp, Jan 5, contact Don Schwab, 757-253-7072; Mathews, Dec. 30, contact Mary Pulley, 804-725-5471; Newport News, Dec. 15, contact, Hayes Williams, 804-693-4417.

## OFFICERS ELECTED FOR 2002

The nominating slate proposed by Chairman of the Nominating Committee, John McDowell, was elected at the November meeting. Officers for 2002 are:

President, Hugh Beard  
V.P. & Program Chairman, Dan Cristol  
V.P. & Co-editor of the Flyer, Phil Young  
V.P. & Co-editor of the Flyer, Bill Holcombe  
Treasurer, Charles Rend  
Secretary, Alex Minarik  
Board member & Field Trip Chair, Tom Armour  
Board member-at-large, Lee Schuster

## FIELD NOTES FOR NOVEMBER

*All members are invited to supply reports for these notes. We do not report the birds most commonly seen year 'round but are interested in arrivals, departures and sightings of seasonal birds, (or) rarely seen birds, (or) any interesting bird behavior, (or) a report on a birding trip that you especially enjoyed. Bill Holcombe, 757-229-8057 or [bowljack@aol.com](mailto:bowljack@aol.com).*

Nov. 4 – Joe Doyle sees first **Hooded Mergansers** and **Pied-billed Grebes** of the season at Camp Peary; also notes hundreds of **Cormorants** gathering there.

Nov. 4 – Brian Taber, over on the Eastern Shore, sees **Western Kingbirds** and notes that on the night before the sky held a lot of **Tundra Swans** flying south.

Nov. 6 – Alex Minarik has her first **Purple Finch** on her feeder.

Nov. 7 – Tom Armour spots *his* **Purple Finch** feeding in his yard.

Nov. 13 – Tom Armour finds first **Red-breasted Nuthatch** of the year in his yard. He also reports at Kingsmill Marina **100 Forester's Terns** and five **Coot**. Notes that "**Royal Terns** are all gone."

Nov. 14 – Alex Minarik, with her lab Kate, has a good day walking the Jamestown Island loop — "saw seven species of woodpecker including the **Red-headed, both Kinglets, Brown Creeper, Swamp Sparrow, two Sharp-shinned Hawks** and a **Winter Wren.**"

Nov. 15 – Dan Cristol reports that the on-campus banding station has been catching lots of **Fox Sparrows** and that there are two **Wild Turkeys** roosting in the tall pines by the tennis center.

Nov. 17 – Bill Snyder reports "gorgeous adult **Bald Eagle**" over Powhatan Creek and a **Northern Harrier** a couple of days earlier.

Nov. 17 – Finds three **American Pippets** at Jamestown Island "just after the toll booth."

Nov. 19 – Hugh Beard hears and then sees a **Barred Owl** in his yard.

Nov. 22 – Ruth Beck has a Happy Thanksgiving with sightings of a **Northern Shrike, Brown Creeper** and **Purple Finch** in Barhamsville. (This may be the first Northern Shrike seen in our area in several years, although in the early days of the club it was seen here several times a year.)

Nov.22 – Alex Minarik also has a Happy Thanksgiving with a **Fox Sparrow** scratching under her feeder.

Nov. 22 – Brian Taber has a **Red-breasted Nuthatch** on his feeder but hasn't seen it since. Also reports three **Bluebirds** on his suet feeder, "which is new for me."

Nov.24 – Shirley Devan checks out Longhill Swamp Pond off Longhill Road near the District Sports Complex and finds three **Hooded Mergansers** (two males and a female), male and female **Red-headed Woodpeckers** and "a large number of **Bluebirds** near the ball field."

Nov. 24 – Alex Minarik has a **Pine Siskin** at a thistle feeder. Two **Purple Finch** and the **Fox**

**Sparrow** returned. On a trip down the Washington Ditch at the Dismal Swamp she saw two **Bald Eagles**, a **Catbird**, several **Fox Sparrows**, a **Winter Wren** and a large flock of **Tundra Swans** on Lake Drumond. The next day on Upper Brandon Road in Prince George County she spotted a **Snow Goose** in a flock of 200 **Canada Geese** and then found two **Ruddy Ducks** and a **Shoveler Duck** on a nearby pond.

Nov. 25 – Hugh Beard spots a real winner. A participant in the Cornell University Feederwatch program, Hugh was checking **Goldfinches**, **House Finches** and **Juncos** around his feeder when “I saw a flash of yellow and thought it might be a Goldfinch holding his yellow colors. Then it came into the open and I couldn’t believe my eyes. It was a mature **Yellow Warbler!**” We don’t see a lot of these around even in the spring months!

Nov. 26 – Bill Williams found a female **Bobolink** at Mainland Farms. This date is a whole month later than the “late date” reported in the Club’s 1997 annotated list.

Nov.27 – Tom Armour spots ten **Red-breasted Mergansers** on the James as he was catching “two nice rock fish.” This is the first fall report of Red-breasted Mergansers.

Nov.28 – Alex Minarik, walking Jamestown Island with the faithful lab, Kate, found six **Least Sandpipers**, **Savannah Sparrows**, “large flocks of **Cedar Waxwings** everywhere and a *singing* **HERMIT THRUSH!** The warm weather must have him confused!”

Nov. 29 – Tom Armour sees a **Common Loon** and 15 **Bufflehead** on the James. At the Kingsmill Marina, he sees 127 **Forster’s Terns**, five **Coot**, eight **Great Black-backed Gulls**, 25 **Laughing Gulls**, six **Herring Gulls** and ten **Ringbills**.

Nov. 30 – Dan Cristol watches an immature **Merlin** chasing crows, and an **American Pippit** at Jamestown Island. Also reports that **Ringbill Gulls** started dropping their clams on the road to break the shells at least several weeks earlier than normal. Dan wonders if this predicts a cold winter. Ha!

The November Report from Camp Peary by Grace and Joe Doyle, includes three weekend trips. They varied from 27 species to 44. Included are: **Pied-billed Grebe**, **Great Egret**, **American Black Duck**, **Canvasback**, **Ring-necked Duck**, **Bufflehead**, **Hooded Merganser**, **Ruddy Duck**, **Bald**

**Eagle**, **Sharp-shinned Hawk**, **Red-tailed Hawk**, **Northern Bobwhite**, **Killdeer**, **Belted Kingfisher**, **Eastern Phoebe**, **Brown-headed Nuthatch**, **Ruby-crowned Kinglet**, **Yellow-rumped Warbler**, **Pine Warbler**, **Swamp Sparrow**, **White-throated Sparrow**, **Junco** and **Eastern Meadowlark**.

Dec. 3 – (*We’re moving into December a bit with this one but I think that it deserves some comment from those knowledgeable enough to do so. Ed.*)

Tony and Chris Dion were crossing the open area beyond the toll booth at Jamestown Island when they stopped to watch some activity in the water to their left: “A large flock of cormorants was moving across the water left to right and then reversing, flapping their wings and causing a great commotion while stirring up the water as a group. Periodically they’d stop and scoop up fish near the surface. We watched for the better part of half an hour and we guessed that they were herding the fish. A rather large flock of gulls flew just above the cormorants, being opportunistic, and a Belted Kingfisher very close by on the shore watched but stayed out of the way.” Tony thinks that there may have been some Anhingas mixed in with the Cormorants, which would have been an extremely rare sighting. Comments from anyone with knowledge of this kind of Cormorant behavior will be appreciated.

## **VIRGINIA INTERNET REPORTS OF SPECIAL INTEREST**

Nov.9 – From nearby Gloucester County, “First **Purple Finch**, **Ruby-crowned Kinglet** and **Winter Wren** arrive. **Hermit Thrush**, **Towhees** and **Juncos** about for two weeks.”

Nov. 11 – **Northern Goshawk** in Orange County and **Loggerhead Shrike** in Culpepper County. **Long-tailed Ducks** on Lake Anna.

Nov. 12 – Immature **Rufous Hummingbird** at southern end of Virginia Beach feeding on Pineapple Sage (Red Salvia). On Dec.1 a **Rufous Hummingbird** was reported in Springfield, Fairfax County and it was also feeding on the same bushes. (Larry Lynch)

Reports that Mary Gustafuson banded a first year male and a first year female **Rufous Hummingbird** in Chesterfield County.

Nov. 17 – An **Evening Grosbeak** in Alexandria. On Nov. 23 a group of five is in West Point.

Nov. 21 – Clair Mellenger ended 15 days of banding **Saw-whet Owls** in Rockingham County, during which she banded 116 **Northern Saw-whet Owls** and caught six owls previously banded at other stations.

Nov. 25 - **Baltimore Oriole** at Dyke Marsh in Fairfax County, twelve **White-winged Crossbills** at Chincoteague and 30 **Marbled Godwits**. Reporter Ned Brinkley also says that Calvin Brennen, at Kiptopeke State Park during “past week, saw both **White-winged and Red Crossbills** mostly on flyovers. Also had third **Northern Goshawk** of the season.”

Dec. 1 - **Snow Bunting** seen feeding on the road atop of Whitetop Mountain, Grayson County. Some local folks saw the report and found the bird next day.

## HAWK WATCHING

*(Phil Young spotted this article by James Gorman in the New York Times and we thought an excerpt of his rather lengthy piece might be of interest as the migrating hawk watching season starting in September has just come to a close. He tells the story from a hawk watching station on top of Hook Mountain near Nyack, New York on a day in late September. Ed.)*

The hawk watchers were sitting on folding chairs in the bright sun perched on top of Hook Mountain with a 360-degree view up and down the Hudson River and to the ridges east and west. It was a slow morning with only a Kestrel, two Northern Harriers and two Sharp-shinned Hawks recorded. It wasn't always this slow. On the “big day,” September 15, at the height of the southward migration of the Broad-winged Hawk, a vast flock of birds, called a “kettle,” passed by the mountain.

The sky was thick with hawks for a good 45 minutes. Two dozen people gazed through binoculars at 9,000 Broad-winged Hawks (9,087 to be exact, although I don't know how you could be that precise) with 17 Bald Eagles to keep them company. The next day there were 3,000 of the Broadwings. Broad-winged Hawks are unusual in that they migrate in such large groups.

*(Their migrating period is compressed into a much shorter number of days than most migrating raptors. The first ten days of October are normally when most of the Broad-winged Hawks*

*pass through Virginia.)*

Fortunately, the pace of migrating hawks picked up around 10:30, when a flight of Sharp-shinned hawks flew across the mountain not twenty feet over our heads. Then a few more were spotted in the distance, including a Peregrine Falcon over the river. Then a hawk passed close enough to fill my binoculars. The sunlight caught its reddish underbelly and the feathers practically glowed. The detailed markings on wings, head and tail were all clear and bright as it glided past on the wind. Another hawk watcher told me that it was an immature Northern Harrier. The total count for the day was 99 raptors, mostly Sharp-shinned Hawks. The real treat of the day came late when two migrating Bald Eagles were harassed in flight by resident Red-tailed Hawks defending their territories.

September and October are big months for hawk migration (*in New York, with the major Virginia hawk watching stations open through November.*)

The birds seen on the Eastern Seaboard are following one of several flyways south from the northern United States and Canada to wintering grounds in the southern United States, Mexico and other warm spots. Different species fly at different times – Broad-winged Hawks flew in September, Sharp-shinned Hawks in October. And, of course, some hawks don't migrate. (*Some ornithologists may quarrel with this statement.*) But the ones that do all follow paths where the weather produces up-drafts so that they can soar and not spend their time beating their wings. Hawk watchers find spots somewhere along these paths, bring their binoculars and count. Most numbers are funneled to the Hawk Migration Association where they are analyzed to see what can be learned from the ups and downs of hawk populations.

Pete Dunne, director of the Audubon Society's Cape May Observatory says that so far this year, the numbers of migrating hawks is down but no conclusions can be drawn from the figures at just one location. Experience has shown, he said, that hawk numbers go up and down for many reasons. One clear trend in recent years has been the steady increase in Bald Eagles. An opposite trend has been the decline in Kestrels, perhaps because of the loss of habitat.

## SOME INTERESTING MIGRATION FACTS

*From Audubon Encyclopedia of N. American Birds*

While there are a variety of theories to explain bird migration, they all basically conclude that the purpose is to enhance the chances of brood survival. The origin of the behavior seems divided into two schools of thought. One believes that in warmer times the birds lived in their present nesting range and they were forced to find milder wintering climates as the nesting territory grew colder. The second has it that they originally lived in their wintering ranges and were attracted to their present nesting territories by climate changes that enhanced brood survival.

In any event, while migration behavior is inherited, significant physiological changes stimulate that conduct. After the breeding season and molting times and just before they migrate, the metabolism of these birds undergoes profound changes. Apparently activated by the pituitary and adrenal glands, birds begin to accumulate large amounts of fat just under the skin. For example the Blackpoll Warbler that normally weighs 11-12 grams may double that weight in time for fall migration. This is enough fat reserve for it to fly nonstop over the Atlantic Ocean for about 85 hours to the mainland of South America. Experiments suggest that a male Ruby-throated Hummingbird weighing about 4½ grams could fly nonstop for 26 hours. At an average speed of 40 kilometers per hour that would permit the bird to fly the 1,040 miles required to cross the Gulf of Mexico.

A migratory flight may exhaust the migrants so they arrive emaciated at various traditional stopping points, referred to as "staging points." There the birds eat increased amounts of food and replenish their fat reserves in preparation for the next phase of the migratory flight.

Birds that migrate, as apparent adaptations to their long flights, have relatively long and more pointed wings than closely related non-migrants and weigh less. Usually, a greater number of species migrate away from more severe climates; i.e. more migrate from Canada than from the U.S. and fewer still migrate from Mexico. Some that winter in the U.S. travel only a few hundred miles southward from their nesting grounds: e.g., some Gold Finches, Tree Sparrows, Slate-colored

Juncos and Meadowlarks. Some, such as House Wrens, some American Robins, the Eastern Bluebird, some Hermit Thrushes and some warblers continue farther to the southern states. Many that nest in Canada pass southward each fall to winter throughout the Northeast and all the way south to the Gulf of Mexico.

More than a hundred species that summer in the U.S. leave our country to winter in the West Indies or Central or South America. A few of these migrants such as the Gray Catbird and the Baltimore Oriole winter in Canada or the Northeastern U.S. near feeding stations that offer suitable food.

Some of our migrating birds are long distance travelers. Some winter in Brazil, south of the equator, Nighthawks, Barn Swallows, Cliff Swallows and some of the thrushes and vireos. Bobolinks travel about 5,000 miles from Canadian nesting grounds to Argentine wintering areas. Some Nighthawks and Barn Swallows travel still farther and travel from the Yukon or Alaska 7,000 miles away to Argentina.

Of course, not all birds migrate. Some of those familiar to us are Bobwhite, Quail, Pileated, Red-bellied and Downey Woodpeckers, White-breasted Nuthatch, Carolina Wren, Northern Cardinal and Tufted Titmouse. There are even year-'round residents in the arctic such as Willow Ptarmigan, Snowy Owl, Three-toed Woodpecker, Gray Jay, Red-breasted Nuthatch and Snow Bunting. Of course, especially severe conditions in some years send these birds farther south too. *(Perhaps we can add some facts about migrating shore birds in a later edition. Ed.)*