



THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

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NEXT MEETING

The Williamsburg Bird Club next meets at 7:30 on Wednesday, April 16 in Room 117, Millington Hall, William & Mary campus. David Des-Rochers, a former student of Dan Cristol's, has completed a very important study on wetland birds in southeastern Virginia. With the support of the Bird Club he demonstrated that the replacement wetlands touted as replacements for destroyed wetlands, are not supporting the expected numbers of birds. This finding suggests that some rethinking is needed on national wetland policy. David recently completed his Master's Degree at William & Mary and now teaches biology at Thomas Nelson Community College.

FIELD TRIP: GT. DISMAL SWAMP

Here is a very good chance to get a good start on the arriving migrants from the tropics. Past experience has included warblers such as the Northern Parula, Yellow-throated, Pine, Prairie, Palm, Blackpoll, Black and White, Prothonotary, Common Yellowthroat, Nashville, and at least once, the elusive Swainson's. Others possible are the White-eyed and Red-eyed Vireos, Great-crested Flycatcher, and Yellow-billed Cuckoo. This being the place that it is, the unexpected is always possible. Past trips have listed more than 50 species.

Please note that this is NOT the Saturday AFTER the regular meeting but is the following Saturday, April 26. Brian Taber will lead the trip. We will gather for an early start at 6 a.m. at the Colonial Shopping Center and meet street side, above the Fresh Market to consolidate cars. We plan to walk the Jericho Ditch and the drive takes about an hour plus a bit. Mosquitoes can be a problem but

are not always so but long pants and sleeves plus some spray are advisable. You'll also need some food and something to drink. These are usually left in the cars for "after birding." We should be back here by 2:00 to 2:30 p.m.

If you miss the gathering in the parking lot but want to catch up, here are the directions: Take Route 64 East to Route 664 South. Exit 664 at 13A which leads you onto a combined Rte 13, Rte 58, and Route 460 Bus. going toward Suffolk. Pass the truck weigh station and take 58 Business. Just past the Race Track Gas Station and John Deere Dealership, go left at the light onto East Washington Street (Rt.337). Go about 2 miles to second traffic light and make a very sharp left onto Whitemarsh Road, Rte. 642. (At this intersection you will see a sign for "Feather and Skin Fried Chicken") Follow Whitemarsh Road about $\frac{3}{4}$ mile and look for small sign on the left. "Jericho Ditch." Turn left on this dirt road. It will take you to the gate marked, "Jericho Ditch – Dismal Swamp" and park there.

FIELD REPORTS FOR MARCH

Please send reports to Bill Holcombe by phone 229-8057, email @ bowljack@aol.com, or to 3705 Lady Slipper path, Williamsburg, Va. 23188. (f.o.t.s. means "first of the season")

Bill Williams reports from the Center for Conservation Biology that by March 10 aerial surveys had found Bald Eagle nests with downy young and many nests with incubating birds. Great Blue Herons have also started their spring rituals of active courtship and nest building.

Dan Cristol reports that a campus study program has resulted in erecting 100 Bluebird houses variously placed at Eastern State Hospital, WJC

Community Center, the Gospel Farm and the District Park Sports Complex. Dan also says to remember for future winters that Blue Birds came to feeders with peanuts, and that Hermit Thrush fed on Thistle (...and also suet cakes.)

March 1 – Bill Williams found three Gray Catbirds and 28 Fox Sparrows on Jamestown Island.

March 1 – Ruth Beck adds Turkey Vulture to her back yard bird list when one comes to attack a chicken carcass that came out of the soup pot.

March 3 – Grace Doyle reported her f.o.t.s. Osprey and a Great Egret plus a pair of Wood Ducks at Kingsmill Pond.

March 4 – Bill Williams sees four displaying **American Woodcock** at Archer's Hope on the Jamestown end of the Colonial Parkway.

March 5 – Grace Doyle watched three very large flights of Tundra Swans heading north over the C.W. tennis courts. There was also a pair of Red-shouldered Hawks circling the courts. (Bird watching on the tennis court can cost you a couple of points but it sure can be worth it.)

March 5 – Bill Snyder saw his f.o.t.s. Great Egret on Lake Powell Road.

March 5 – Ruth Beck sees an early Phoebe.

March 7 – Tom Armour watches a Common Loon in the James near the Hawk Watch Station and the next day repeats with a Red-throated Loon.

March 7 – Bill Holcombe and Armin Richter had a good day at Hog Island: Horned Grebe, **Red-necked Grebe**, Great Egret, Tundra Swans, Gadwall, Northern Shoveler, Northern Pintail, **Greater Scaup**, Lesser Scaup, Ruddy Ducks, Hooded Merganser, Red-breasted Merganser (at the Ferry), Bald Eagle, American Kestrel, American Coot (at the Ferry), Yellow-rumped Warbler, Pine Warbler, Tree Swallow.

March 8 – There was a **Red-necked Grebe** off the Yorktown Beach, accompanied by 6 to 8 Red-throated Loons, a dozen Common Loons and a Northern Gannet, reports Bill Williams. He also finds a single male **Black Scoter** off Indian Field Creek. (Note: Prior to Hugh Beard's report of a Black Scoter in York River in February there had only been five records of this bird in our area since the club records were started. With Bill's report and Grace Doyle's next report, this year

increased that number to 9.)

March 9 – Grace Doyle spots a Common Loon on Kingsmill Pond (quite a rarity), Tundra Swan and **Black Scoter** on the James River.

March 9 – At least four Osprey have returned to the Greensprings Nature Trail, says Bill Williams.

March 10 – Dan Cristol reports f.o.t.s. Purple Martins.

March 13 – Tom Armour and Bill Williams spot an early, f.o.t.s. Northern Rough-winged Swallow (recorded early date is March 10) and two Lesser Black-backed Gulls at College Creek.

March 14 – Bill Snyder finds an unusual six Great Egrets on Lake Powell.

March 15 – Bill Williams counts six Fox Sparrows at Jamestown Island. His next day has a real winner on the Greensprings Nature Trail – a male **Eurasian Widgeon**, five American Widgeon and 45 Green-winged Teal.

(P.S. Alerted by a call from Bill, Tom Armour, Bill Holcombe and Brian Taber slogged around the Beaver Pond for an hour in a steady rain only to find that the prizes had left, leaving one American Widgeon and a couple of Mallards. It takes an early bird to get Eurasian!)

March 16 – Tom McCary hears and sees "Bob-white" Quail at Shirley Plantation.

March 23 – Hugh Beard has a "once-in-a-lifetime" find, when a **Yellow-headed Blackbird** shows up on his feeder in a flock of Red-winged Blackbirds.

March 23 – Brian Taber reports a f.o.t.s. Barn Swallow.

March 27 – Tom McCary finds a **Horned Lark** at Shirley Plantation and the next day sees a Wild Turkey scurry in and out of the brush along Rte 5.

March 28 – Tom Armour enjoys 250 Red-breasted Mergansers in brilliant breeding plumage on the James River Hawk Watch.

March 29 – Marilyn Zeigler spots a Red Throated Loon off of the Queens Creek landing in the New Quarter Path Park.

March 30 – Grace Doyle investigates a strange squawking and finds a **Yellow-crowned Night Heron** in her neighbor's yard.

Month-of-March Report from Grace and Joe

Doyle: Highlights of the Camp Peary Birds: Horned Grebes, Brown Pelican, Mute Swan, Gadwall, American Widgeon, Canvasback, Ring-necked Duck, Bufflehead, Hooded Merganser, Red-breasted Merganser, Ruddy Duck, Black Vulture, Wild Turkey, Killdeer, Belted Kingfisher, Red-headed Woodpecker, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Fish Crow, Hermit Thrush, Brown Thrasher, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Pine Warbler, Rufous-sided Towhee, Chipping Sparrow, Fox Sparrow, Brown-headed Cowbird.

Late flash from early April: On the 6th the Doyles saw Bluegray Gnatcatchers, Yellow-throated Warblers and Wilson's Snipe at Camp Peary.

ON THE VA EMAIL BIRDLIST

Last month there was a prediction based upon some earlier sightings that Virginia might be in for an "invasion" of Red-necked Grebes. That turned out to be quite prophetic as we not only had two sightings in our area but there were easily at least 50 reports of Red-necked Grebes from almost every point in the state. Toward the end of the month these were multiple sightings of 3, 4, 5, or 6 birds at a location. Some contributors asked if anyone had a theory as to why the state this year was finding this usually rare bird so plentiful. The only plausible response came from a report that this winter three of the Great Lakes had frozen over and the last time that this occurred there had also been an unusual increase in the presence of Red-necked Grebes. I'll skip all of those individual listings. The rest show an interesting front of the spring migration.

Another notable is the Painted Bunting at 9 Randolph Ave. Cape Charles with the added attraction of a Rufous Hummingbird hanging around the same location. The number of references to this pair of birds indicated that they stayed throughout the month and, in fact, no confirmation of their departure has been published on the birdlist.

SPRING BIRD COUNT, MAY 11

The Spring Bird count rather closely follows the plan of the Christmas Bird Count except there are a lot more birds around, there is not even a

nominal charge to pay and you won't get nearly as cold. We cover the same territory that is divided the same way and by and large, the same people coordinate the birding of each territory. It is a great way to spend a day in which you probably will see more species in one day than any other birding day of the year. If you'd like to be a participant, call the coordinator of the territory where you would like to spend the day, or a good part of it, from about 7 a.m. until about 3:30 – 4:00 p.m. and establish a meeting place and time.

Tom Armour – Camp Peary, which is closed to all but Tom and the Doyles.

Hugh Beard – Middle Plantation, roughly the James River to Waller Mill Park and Governor's Land to the south boundary of First Colony. Phone 221-0499.

Ruth Beck – College Woods, which includes the William and Mary campus and parts of Colonial Williamsburg. Phone is 566-8234.

Bettye Fields – Skimino Territory, which is north of Route 64 and runs east from about the York River State Park to the Camp Peary boundary. Phone is 220-2692.

Paul McAllister – Kingsmill, including that subdivision and the Country Road from Carter's Grove to the subdivision. Phone is 229-1323.

Lee Schuster – Jolly Pond, including the Pond and other sites off of Jolly Pond Road. Phone 565-6148.

Dot Silsby – Jamestown Island, including some other nearby assigned territories. Phone is 596-3252.

Brian Taber – Hog Island, including the ferry trip to and from the south shore of the James. Phone is 253-1181.

Bill Williams – The Cheatham Annex Naval base plus some adjacent territory. Phone is 229-6095.

BIRD OF THE MONTH

Barred Owl – by Bill Holcombe with photos by Herb Spannuth

With overnight windows being open again, the hoo-hoo, hoo-hoo, hoo-hoo, how-hoo-whaaa of the Barred Owl is again being heard in Graylin Woods. In the late fall to early winter these birds



develop a pattern of singing at about 4:30 in the afternoon but that doesn't have the same impact of the hooting in the pitch black of the night. In any event hearing them again moves me to include this bird for the month of April.

The 140 species of owls in the world cover the entire world except for a few ocean islands and the Antarctic region. Seventeen of these species live in North America. Three of them live in our immediate area: the Great Horned Owl, the Barred Owl and the Screech Owl. Not long ago the Barn Owl would have been included too, but the last breeding report was in 1990 and the last sighting was in 1992.

The Great Horned Owl shares honors for being the most powerful, along with the Snowy Owl. The North American Elf Owl is the smallest owl in the world, the Gray Owl the largest, and the Snowy Owl is the heaviest. However, for many of us the Barred Owl is the handsomest. While the soft, brown eyes (most owls have yellow eyes) are immediately perceived as beautiful by anyone getting a good look at this owl in the daylight, the

rich reddish brown coloring set off by creamy-white breast and flecks on the back and sides makes this a very handsome creature. The large round head is without tufts. The plump, neat looking feet are covered with a bright yellow, pebbly textured skin covered by feathering that comes down the legs covering all but the ends of the talons. The owl's face is set in a circular shape with a peak coming down between the eyes and approaching the top of the bill. Between that circle and the vertical barring of the front of the body there is a swath of scarf-like feathers with barring running horizontally. While sexes are very similar in coloring and textures, the female, averaging 800 gm (1.75 lb), is clearly larger than the male, averaging 630 gm. Birds range in size from 17 to 24 inches long and the wingspan is between 40 and 50 inches.

Some of the most interesting adaptations of this owl are common to all three residents. All have excellent eyesight for both day and night hunting, and a third eyelid, the opaque nictitating membrane, is well developed to protect the highly sensitive retina from the bright light of day. The ears are even more remarkable. Located on the sides of the head, the openings are quite large, with a feather arrangement that funnels sound into the ear. The ears are not symmetrically placed on the head and one is larger and of a different shape than the other. This difference permits the owls, as in triangulation, to detect the exact location and distance of the sound. The facial disks also help the birds to focus and amplify sound. Experiments show that these owls can hear a mouse squeak fifty yards away. The special wing feathers that make their flight absolutely silent are another special adaptation of these birds. Flight is buoyant and noiseless and the owl flaps and glides its way expertly through forest and tree branches.

The Barred Owl is common east of the prairie states. Its western counterpart is the spotted owl of ecological battle fame. It is one of the most common of the deep woods owls and is found in forest and mountain areas across Canada east of the Rockies and south to the Gulf coast of Texas and Florida.

The Barred Owl is very common in Virginia and in most of the wooded area in the eastern half of the U.S. They are territorial, non-migrating birds



smaller owls....almost anything. However, they do draw the line at skunks that the Great Horned Owl seems to enjoy.

The next time that you hear an owl hooting, if the phrasing matches "Who Cooks? Who Cooks? Who Cooks? Who Cooks for yo-u-u-u?," you are listening to a Barred Owl.

YRST BLUEBIRD TRAIL REPORT

(from Shirley Devan, April 6, 2003)

Dorothy Whitfield and I spent a beautiful morning at the park today. A jacket felt good down by the river but the sun was warm back in the woods.

We have our first Bluebird eggs in boxes – 18! There are seven complete nests. Boxes 3, 13, 18, 26, 29, 30 have Bluebird nests and box 5 has a complete Chickadee nest. I carried my camera along and got good photos of several complete nests in boxes that opened from the front or side. There are four partial nests. Three are bluebird and one is chickadee.

In addition to Bluebirds and Chickadees, we saw: Hermit Thrush near box 35, Palm Warbler in the Friends garden, Tree Swallows around the visitor center and Flickers in Tom's yard. Ospreys were screaming and circling around their nest platform because canoes and kayaks were too close. Red-headed and Red-bellied Woodpeckers were in the lowland swamp at the entrance.

VSO NEEDS VOLUNTEERS

In a Foray starting Saturday, June 7 and ending Sunday, June 15 planned to make a complete survey of the breeding birds in Bath and Highland Counties, the VSO needs volunteer birders who can make reliable bird identifications. The Director is Andrew Dolby, of Mary Washington College. The regional coordinator and contact person is John Spahr, <jspahr@augustamed.com> or 613 Locust Avenue, Waynesboro, Va 22980, phone 540-943-6618 or work, 540-932-4537.

If interested in joining in, call Spar or Dan Cristol for detailed directions to the search sites and suggestions for overnight accomodations.

and have been observed using the same nest for nine years. Like most owls they don't build nests but use hollow trees, old hawk nests, or even squirrel nests and like heights of 25 to 80 feet off of the ground. Territorial hooting starts in December with courtship in January or February and egg laying starts February or March. Eggs are laid every other day and rarely exceed three. The female does most of the incubation with the male staying nearby. It is not clear whether the male feeds the female or sits on the eggs while she hunts. Incubation takes 28 to 33 days. The young leave the nest after 5 to 9 weeks but are unable to fly. They cling to tree branches with talons and beak and have been known to use the same tools to climb back into the tree after falling out. Flight begins the 12th to 15th week. The family stays together until the fall when the young leave to search out new territories.

This bird eats most song birds, mice, rats, squirrels, opossums, fish, large flying insects,