THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

Volume 27, Number 8 **September 2003**

NEXT MEETING

The next meeting of the Williamsburg Bird Club will be on Wednesday, Sept. 17 at 7:30 in Room 117 Millington Hall on the campus of William and Mary. The program will be conducted by Josh LeClerc who is completing a masters program with Dan Cristol. The title of the program is "Bluebirds, Golf Courses and Happiness" which reflects a two year study that Josh has made of Bluebirds and Virginia golf courses.

GOOD TRIP TO CRANEY ISLAND

By Ruth Beck

We had a large turnout of 13 birders for the Craney Island, Portsmouth, Va. field trip on August 23. The weather was downright pleasant. The light, the temperature, the mosquitoes and the birds were all most cooperative as we tallied a total of 54 species. We had to stay a little extra to get the last seven but it was worth it.

Highlights:

Waterfowl and marsh birds: Canada Goose, Black, Mallard, Ruddy, Shoveler and Gadwall ducks. Other water birds were Brown Pelican, Double-crested Cormorant, Great Blue Heron, Great Egret, Snowy Egret and Little Blue Heron.

Osprey and a Red-tailed Hawk represented the raptors.

Shorebirds: (And, of course, these "Global Trotters" were the feature of the day!): American Oyster Catcher, Semipalmated Plover, Black-bellied Plover, Ruddy Turnstone, Spotted Sandpiper, Willet, Greater Yellowlegs, Lesser Yellowlegs, Least Sandpiper, Semipalmated Sandpiper, Western Sandpiper, Black-necked Stilt, Red-necked Phalarope and Wilson's Phalarope. A good variety of terns was included; several Black Terns, many Caspian Terns and Royal Terns, a Common Tern and a Forster's Tern.

A Blue Grosbeak was the highlight of the passerines seen.

Many thanks to Sam Skalak and Elizabeth Long for the time and the enthusiasm during the field trip.

Those enjoying this day were Tom Armour, Bill Williams, Mitchell Byrd, Shirley Devan, Dave Anderton, Bill Holcombe, Marilyn Ziegler, Carol Talbot, Linda Scherer, Sam Skalak, Beth Malmquist and Elizabeth Long.

SEPTEMBER FIELD TRIP

Tom Armour, our field trip coordinator, has planned a visit to the hawk banding station at Kiptopeke State Park on the eastern shore for our September 20 outing. As usual, we'll gather at 7:00 a.m. in the parking lot out front of the Fresh Market on Jamestown Road. Please be ready to depart as soon as possible after pooling together in cars.

This is the beginning of the fall hawk migration and, assuming winds and weather are normal, we should get some exciting views of raptors passing over our region.

WINTER RESIDENTS RETURNING

While the migrants that we eagerly awaited last spring are now moving south to their winter quarters, birds that have nested in Canada or in

northern U.S. that choose to winter in our area are on there way here. This is a reminder to keep a lookout for these visitors.

We are fortunate to host large numbers of waterfowl on the York and James Rivers, at Hog Island, at Sunken Meadow and on several small lakes and ponds dotting this area. For those who dare to look for them it is relatively easy during the winter months to find Red-throated Loons, Common Loons, Pied-billed Grebes, Horned Grebes and Tundra Swans along the York River section of the Colonial Parkway. Large numbers of Ruddy Ducks, Ring-necked Ducks, Lesser Scaup, Bufflehead, Red-breasted Merganser and Hooded Merganser are also seen from the Parkway. Occasionally Red-necked Grebes, Canvasbacks and Common Goldeneye are mixed in. Most of these birds can also be seen at Hog Island, also frequented by Green-winged Teal, American Black Duck, Northern Pintail, Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, American Widgeon, occasionally Blue-winged Teal, and rarely, Redheads. Over in Surrey, at Sunken Meadow, Gadwall, American Widgeon, Tundra Swans and American Black Ducks are frequently seen on the water.

The winter song birds that join the woodpeckers, Mourning Doves, Tufted Titmouse, White-breasted Nuthatch, Carolina Chickadees, Carolina Wrens, Blue Jays, Cardinals, House Finch, Goldfinch and House Sparrows that are in our back yards year 'round, include: Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Dark-eyed Junco, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Ruby Crowned Kinglet, Hermit Thrush, White-throated Sparrow. While they never totally leave, Cedar Waxwings become much more common. Others, not so common to keep watch for, are Brown Creeper, Winter Wren, Purple Finch, Red-breasted Nuthatch and Pine Siskin. And every now and then a really bad winter up north gives us the pleasure of seeing Evening Grosbeaks.

Winter birding in Williamsburg can be very nice, indeed.

SELECTED FACTS ON LONG DISTANCE BIRD MIGRATION

(From the Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds)

Comparatively few North American land-bird migrants pass beyond the South American tropics. However, some winter south of the Equator in Brazil – Nighthawks, Barn Swallows, Cliff Swallows, some of the thrushes and vireos. Bobolinks travel about 5,000 miles from their summer home in Canada and northern United States to southern Brazil and northern Argentina. The Cliff Swallow, Swainson's Thrush, Yellow-billed Cuckoo and Swainson's Hawk are regular migrants to northern Argentina and the annual round trip of the Swainson's Hawk may be 11,000 to 17,000 miles, the longest migration of the North American hawk family.

Many shorebirds are long distance migrants; some go to the West Indies and Central America. Others go deep into South America to shores of lakes in the high Andean plateau and along both coasts of South America. Some of the surf birds that winter along the 12,000 mile Pacific coastline – from Alaska to the Straits of Magellan – travel about 24,000 miles a year in their migrations. The White-rumped Sandpiper (seen at Hog Island among other places) migrates from the Canadian Arctic to Tierra del Fuego and the Falkland Islands, 8,000 to 9,000 miles each way every year. The Baird's Sandpiper annually travels from its arctic nesting ground to Patagonia and back. The Red Knot, going from arctic Canada to the Straits of Magellan and back, makes a 19,000 mile round trip every year.

The Arctic tern makes one of the longest and most spectacular of all migration journeys. In North America it nests from Greenland and the islands in the Arctic, Alaska and Canada to Massachusetts and migrates from the Arctic to the Antarctic. Those that nest in eastern Canada, for instance, start their autumn journey by crossing the Atlantic to Europe, then fly southward along the west coast of Europe and Africa and reach their wintering range off South Africa and southward to the Antarctic Circle.

QUESTION FROM A READER

A reader asks if anyone in the club can tell him why he is seeing so many bald-headed birds in his back yard. About three years ago he and his wife noticed a bald-headed Cardinal or Cardinals in their yard. The next year they became aware that

a bald-headed Blue Jay had joined the hairless Cardinals. This summer a bald Gray Catbird joined this group.

The reader assured me that this is not a factor associated with molting, for they see these birds, except for Catbird, throughout the year. Discussing this with club member Edith Edwards, she said that for about three years her yard has been frequented by a bald-headed Cardinal. She feels rather certain that she is seeing a single bird in that condition.

BIRD OF THE MONTH

Ruby-throated Hummingbird

By Bill Holcombe

Almost everything about Hummingbirds is unusual. Their dazzling iridescent colors surpass those of the Birds of Paradise of Australia and New Guinea. They have slender pointed bills, straight or curved, adapted especially to probe flowers for nectar. Tongues are tubular at tip and brush tipped. The small size is incredible. The Ruby Throated Hummingbird's body is no longer than the end joint of one's thumb. Their tiny crop is adapted to storing sustenance overnight. By becoming dormant they can endure temporary cool weather or cold nights.

There were 339 valid species of hummingbirds identified as of 1980 and more may have been added to the list by now. The largest of these is an 8-½ inch long *patagona gigas* of the South American Andes. The smallest (the smallest bird in the world) is a 2-¼ inch Cuban hummingbird, *mellisagu helenae*. 21 species enter the United States, of which only eight penetrate very far above the Mexican border. Seven species nest in the far west and four (Black-chinned, Calliope, Ruby-throated and Rufous) nest also in Canada. The Calliope is the smallest of this group and of all North American birds, having a body length of 2-¾ to 3-½ inches and wingspan of 4-¼ inches. (This tiny bird nests in the Rocky Mountains of British Columbia and winters in Mexico.)

All hummingbirds can fly forward, backward straight up or down, hover in mid-air and can dart from one mode to another at high speed. Because of their small size hummingbirds have the highest metabolism of any warm blooded vertebrate in the world with the possible exception of the shrews, the smallest of the mammals. They must feed almost continuously all day to stay alive.

Most North American Hummingbirds migrate over long distances and migration requires extra fuel. These birds also have unusually large flight muscles that account for 22 to 34 % of their body weight. A special adaptation enables them to store fuel for these flights. For example, many of the Ruby-throated Hummingbirds in both spring and fall migrations fly across 600 miles of the Gulf of Mexico before migrating from Florida and Georgia. Studies show that these birds nesting there increase their food intake and add 50% to their body weight in a fat layer just under the skin.

The Ruby-throated Hummingbird is one of the smallest and most widespread of the North American "hummers," nesting over the eastern two thirds of the U.S., from Canada to the Gulf. It was thought to have been the only hummingbird nesting east of the Mississippi River but that is being questioned by studies in the southeastern states.

This bird is 3 to 3-¾ inches in length with a wing-span of 4 to 4-¾. Both sexes are metallic green on top and gray below but the male has a throat band that, depending on the light, can look black or a fiery ruby color. It has a slightly forked tail. The female has a white throat, no fork in tail and prominent white spots on the outer tail corners.

They leave their winter homes in southern Texas, central Florida or Costa Rico in late winter and move northward keeping pace with the blooming of nectar bearing flowers. They arrive in the North in March and early April and in Canada in May. The sexes migrate apart and the males arrive on the nesting grounds first. The males fly exotic

flight patterns in courtship and in one of these the male flies back and forth in a 180 degree arc as though he were swinging on the end of a wire. At M.I.T. wing beats were photographed during some of these maneuvers and showed that when hovering the wings beat 55 times a second, 61 times a second when backing up and 75 times a second when flying forward.

Males establish feeding territories which they guard very aggressively. When a female in breeding condition enters his territory he performs his aerial courtship before her and when accepted, his only relationship with propagation is copulation. The female builds the nest, incubates the eggs and feeds the young. The male may mate with several females during a nesting season. This system frequently produces two broods per female and sometimes a third. It is believed that females surviving the migration return to the same area to build their next nests.

The nest is an exquisitely made small cup about the size of an old fifty cent piece. It is compactly built of down from ferns, milkweed, thistles, young oak leaves and is woven together by the female's bill with spider silk or web from a tent caterpillar's nest. She starts by attaching an inch long base to the tree branch and then builds up the sides of the cup. The upper part of the cup is quite thin and curved inwards to hold the eggs and the young inside. The outer cup is decorated with moss and lichen until it appears to be a bump on the limb. Normally two eggs, the size of small beans, are laid and incubated for 16 days. The young fledge in about 20-22 days. They are presumably fed on the same mixture of nectar and insects that sustains the adults.

Based upon the numbers of hummingbirds visible in our area we apparently have quite a large and healthy population. It is also likely that this population migrates to winter quarters in south Texas or Mexico. So some of our local Ruby-throats that weigh about 1/10 of an ounce are veterans of round trip migrations of 5,000 to 6000 miles. Some of those may have a one way Gulf of Mexico crossing of 600 miles of open water. It is not unusual for these birds to live eight or nine years. It is hard for me to grasp that a living creature of that minuscule weight can have the courage, the perseverance, the drive and the skill to make that great flight twice a year for eight years! You may recall last year's rather bizarre story of the woman over in the Shenandoah Valley who rescued a hummingbird from a praying mantis. Then I was amazed to find in the encyclopedia reports of three praying mantis attacks on birds feeding from flowers, and an even more bizarre report of a dragonfly catching a hummingbird and pinning it to the ground. Wilder yet was the report of frogs snatching humming birds out of the air. While fascinating, I still find it difficult to accept these reports as fact, even in the authoritative Audubon Encyclopedia. But maybe those stories just match the amazing facts about these birds.

P.S. After checking my hummingbird feeders very carefully and noting that they get emptied in about four days I believe that I need only wash them after the second filling is gone. Maybe there is no hard and fast rule of thumb for that decision, except not to put them back up without washing if you see black on them.

PICTURES ANYONE?

Herb Spannuth, who lives in Landfall out near Jamestown Island, passed on the photos he took of a Red-headed Woodpecker at his backyard feeder. The editors would love to print other quality pictures our readers can provide.