



# THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

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## NEXT MEETING

The Williamsburg Bird Club will next meet on Wednesday, Feb. 19 at 7:30 in Room 117 of Millington Hall on the campus of William and Mary. Alexandra Wilke, a graduate student of Ruth Beck's and winner of the club's research award, will talk about her research of the mysteriously declining North American Oyster Catcher population on Virginia's Eastern Shore. Ruth Beck has called a meeting of officers for 6:15 prior to the meeting.

## FEBRUARY FIELD TRIP

On Saturday, February 22, Brian Taber will lead the field trip to Hog Island. We will gather in the Colonial Shopping Center parking lot, up from the Fresh Market. Be prepared to leave by 7:30. All cars will be checked at the guard station of the Surrey Power Plant and you must have a picture ID. Eagles, ducks, swans and geese are expected and some yellowlegs and shore birds have recently been spotted. Hog Island can frequently produce birding surprises.

## We Lose Two Charter Members:

### JULIE HOTCHKISS AND CHARLIE HACKER

Julie Hotchkiss died February 5 ending her battle with pancreatic cancer. She called in her last bird report on January 14 when she spotted a large mixed flock of white and blue Snow Geese near Curles Neck on the James River. Somehow this birding interest virtually right up to the end of her life says a good deal about Julie. She and her husband Ty were among the charter members of

the Williamsburg Bird Club in 1977. She rarely missed a Christmas or Spring Bird Count in all of the intervening years and when she did so, she was usually off on a trip with Ty to explore some out of the way natural site where interesting birds might be found. They were experts on the back roads of the Grand Teton National Park. For many years this couple made films for The National Audubon Society Lecture Series. They also made a film about the colonial naturalist-artist, Mark Catesby. And Julie took real pride in the bird articles that she placed with magazines.

The supporters of controlled growth and the protection of the natural environment have lost a strong helping hand. The Club has lost one of the world's warmest smiles and a delightful, knowledgeable, helpful birding companion.

Many of us don't know **Charlie Hacker** so well, as illness had kept him on the inactive list for the past several years. He died February 2. He played a very active role in Williamsburg Birding in the early years of the Club. He was one of the charter members. With others, he started the bird banding station at Kiptopeke. He was a former President of the Virginia Society of Ornithology. Charlie Hacker was one of the top birders in this part of Virginia. His sharp birding skills and his wonderful sense of humor will be missed.

## YORK RIVER STATE PARK BLUE-BIRD TRAIL CAN USE SOME HELP

Would you like to be able to say next September that you had helped bring a large number of Blue-birds into this world? Shirley Devan heads the Bird Club group that looks after a large number of bird boxes at the York River State Park. The

group starts checking the boxes on this trail in mid March. They have increased the productivity of the box trail every year for at least the past three. If you would enjoy a productive close to nature experience, call Shirley Devan at 220-6269 or Email her at [sedevan52@cox.net](mailto:sedevan52@cox.net). No experience is necessary and you pick the number of days that you want to participate.

## **FEB. 14 – 17: THE 6<sup>th</sup> ANNUAL GREAT BACK YARD BIRD COUNT**

Once again, the National Audubon Society and The Cornell Lab of Ornithology call on volunteers of every age and skill level to make the Count possible. “We need every birder to join us,” said Audubon Senior Vice President of Science, Frank Gill. “The Great Back Yard Bird Count has become an important means of gathering data to help birds, but it can’t happen unless people take part. Whether you’re a novice or an expert, we need you to take part and to help us help birds.”

This year’s GBBC will focus on such threats to bird life as habitat loss, introduced predators, and diseases such as the West Nile Virus with special attention to victims of the virus such as Crows, Blue jays, owls, raptors and others. Instructions and other information can be found at [www.bird-source.org](http://www.bird-source.org).

This is how you can participate:

Pick an area such as your neighborhood, including your backyard. Keep track of the species that you see and the number of each species using the highest number seen at one time, to avoid duplicate counts of the same birds. Keep track of how long you spent observing each day using minimum time blocks of one quarter hour. You may count the same area each day or you may pick another, such as a park, a pond or a river bank which you must clearly define. You can report for just one day or for all four.

Go to the Web Site [www.birdsource.org/gbbc](http://www.birdsource.org/gbbc) to file your report. This is a very user friendly site and you don’t need to be a computer expert to file. If you are not on line, you can take your reports to Wild Birds Unlimited who will file them, or you can send them to Bill Holcombe at 4705 Lady Slipper Path, Williamsburg, Va. 23188. While

this is not yet clear, the library may also be able to file them for you.

## **FIELD NOTES FOR JANUARY**

*To do a good job on Field Notes I need more reports from you folks than I am getting. This is a plea for more Emails to [bowljack@aol.com](mailto:bowljack@aol.com) or phone calls to 229-8057. Bill Holcombe*

**Overview:** During the last ten days or so of January we saw an invasion of Williamsburg by very large flocks of Robins. They virtually blanketed the athletic field north of Phi Beta Kappa Hall on one of those days and were scattered across lawns everywhere. On one of the warmer days a flock of more than a hundred filled the trees on one side of the Powhatan Creek parking area off of the Colonial Parkway; on the other side the trees were filled with Cedar Waxwings. The two groups peacefully shared the puddles of water formed by sun melted ice. Feeders got a real workout all over town as the snow cover hung on. The Rufous Hummingbird on a local feeder continued his stay and at one point was joined by a Baltimore Oriole. Hugh Beard reports that he saved a Woodcock feeding on his front lawn from becoming lunch for his cat. He also watched a Great Blue Heron flush a Common Snipe from a marsh at Jamestown Island, had an immature Red-shouldered Hawk hanging around his yard and had his car christened by a flock of Cedar Waxwings. Tom McCary noted the large numbers of Robins and Cedar Waxwings seen this month and enjoyed a Hermit thrush and Brown Thrasher in his yard. Bill Holcombe had a Brown creeper, a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and a Hermit Thrush in the yard, and a Red-headed Woodpecker on the Greenspring Nature Trail.

**Month of January at Camp Peary** – Grace and Joe Doyle made three trips this month but one was washed out by bad trails and roads and another was totally snowed out. Best day had 40 species. Brown Pelican, Tundra Swan, Mute Swan, Mallard, Gadwall, Canvasback, Ring-necked Duck, Bufflehead, Hooded Merganser, Ruddy Duck, Bald Eagle, Red-tailed Hawk, Killdeer, Belted Kingfisher, Red-headed Woodpecker, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Northern Flicker, Pileated Woodpecker, Gold-crowned Kinglet, Ruby-

crowned Kinglet, Brown Thrasher, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Pine Warbler, Rufous-sided Towhee, Eastern Meadowlark, Brown-headed Cowbird.

Jan.5 – Bill Snyder called to report a strange gathering of 15 Turkey Vultures in a tree across Powhatan Creek from his house.

Jan. 12 – Bill Holcombe visited the CBBT and had rather meager results of Surf Scoters, Black Scoters, Great Cormorants, a female Common Eider, Red-breasted Mergansers and Lesser Scaup.

Marilyn Zeigler saw three Red-headed Woodpeckers in the Bassett Woods and heard several more — “The woods seemed full of them!”

Jan 14 – Julie Hotchkiss found a large flock of mixed white and blue-form Snow Geese at Curles Neck off Route 5, coming home from Richmond.

Jan. 15 – Martha Briggs called to express her delight at the brilliant blue on the pair of Bluebirds that she spotted at Phi Beta Kappa Memorial Hall.

Jan. 18 – Tom Armour sighted two Red-breasted Mergansers in College Creek and five Fox Sparrows at the Colonial Williamsburg exit from the Colonial Parkway.

Bill Holcombe, scouting the Parkway along the James following the snow storm, spotted a Woodcock feeding in a muddy patch along with several Killdeer. Next day in that area there was a Sharpshinned Hawk picking up a beak-full of pine needles before flying off.

Jan.22 – Tom Armour had a good day at the Kingsmill Marina where he saw six Lesser Black-backed Gulls and a very “uncommon” Common Merganser on Warham’s Pond. Then, at the Vineyards Pond, he saw two Black Ducks, 15 Ring-necks, five Scaup and a flock of 75 Chipping Sparrows feeding in the rows of vines.

Jan. 24 – Bill Holcombe located a Barred Owl during a visit to Kingsmill.

Jan. 25 – Tom Armour visited the local Rufus Hummingbird and got a Baltimore Oriole as a bonus.

Jan. 26 – Bill Holcombe returned to the CBBT with John McDowell and they had a better day than the last that included Double-crested

Cormorants, Great Cormorants, a huge flock of Lesser Scaup, Female Common Eider, Surf Scoter, White-winged Scoter, Black Scoter, two pairs of Harlequin Ducks in non-breeding plumage (thought that they were four females until I checked the books), two Long-tailed Ducks, Buffleheads, Hooded Mergansers, Red-breasted Mergansers, Purple Sandpipers and a flock of Ruddy Turnstones. The scoters formed a raft with numbers in the hundreds and a rather eerie wailing seemed to come from them. Petersen’s Field Guide attributes “melodious cooing” vocalization to the Black Scoters and we assumed that was what we were hearing.

Feb.1 – At Hog Island Bill Holcombe found Tundra Swans, Pintail, Ringbills, Hooded Mergansers, Lesser Yellowlegs, Kestrel, Tree Swallows, Yellow-rumped Warblers and Pine Warblers. Chippoke Swamp had Swamp Sparrows. Sunken Meadow had Tundra Swan, American Widgeon, Gadwall, Mallards and many waterfowl too distant to identify.

*I am in this report so much because I am trying to full fill a dream of listing 200 species in one year and I have to get ALL of the winter birds now. — Bill Holcombe*

## **VIRGINIA NOTES FROM THE INTERNET**

Jan. 8 – Bull Run Post Office Road, Short-eared Owls, Northern Harriers and a Merlin.

Jan. 11 – Immature Trumpeter Swan, Prince William County off of Rt. 654. Also seen Jan 15 and 17.

Jan. 20 – One Redhead in a flock of Coot at Dyke Marsh. Also, Orange-crowned Warbler at Dyke.

Jan.20 – Lapland Longspur in a flock of Horned Larks, Loudon County.

Jan. 24 – Rufous Hummingbird still at feeder in Cape Charles and seen by many birders.

Jan. 25 – Highland County and Lake Moomaw, five Bald Eagles, three Golden Eagles, Rough-legged Hawk, Lapland Longspur and 75 Horned Grebes.

Jan.25 – Blue-headed Vireo on State Rte. 612, Louisa County.

Jan.26 – Black-crowned Night Herons and Brant at Lynnhaven Inlet.

Jan. 27 – 100 Common Mergansers and 24 Bald Eagles, Leesylvania, Prince William County.

Jan. 27 – Five Sandhill Cranes near Chillowie, near Exit 35, Interstate 81.

Jan. 29 – Craney Island: Canvasback, Greater Scaup, Horned Grebe, American Pipit and Horned Lark.

There were also many comments about the large flocks of Robins which some believed were coming from North Carolina during the last week in January.

## HOW DO BIRDS SURVIVE IN THIS COLD?

To start with, their diets contain energy rich foods and they have about double the glucose in their blood that humans have, which induces a higher metabolic rate and produces higher body temperatures than those of mammals. In northern areas some birds have more feathers in winter than in summer and smaller birds have more feathers per unit of body weight than do larger birds. Feathers encircle them and insulate them with confined air. Lower legs and feet are tendinous (i.e., without exposed fleshy parts, as in mammals) and bills are not of skin but of horn, giving off little heat.

Exposed skin areas of birds is minimal: there are no projecting fleshy ears, tails or legs from which heat must be lost. Many water birds have a thick insulating layer of fat. When perching, birds often sit with one foot tucked into their feathers and ducks on ice sit on their feet. Ducks and geese also have a remarkable adaptation that prevents their feet from freezing while they stand on ice. In their feet, veins and arteries lie close together. The returning blood of the veins is warmed by the arterial blood, effecting a rapid replacement of lost heat.

Shivering is used by some (perhaps all) birds (pigeons and Chickadees, for example) for short-term adjustment to cold.

Evening Grosbeaks and some other northern finches are able to store relatively large amounts of seeds in their well-developed crops which seem effective in maintaining high metabolism for them

over night. Researchers found that Redpolls can survive colder temperatures better than any other songbird by use of a special adaptation in their esophagus. They fill this sac-like storage pouch with food just before darkness so as to digest the food over night. Also, they select higher calorie foods (e.g., birch seeds) over others.

There are a variety of behavioral adaptations: Small birds that do not feed at night conserve heat by nesting in sheltered places at night. Chickadees, nuthatches and woodpeckers sleep in holes in trees. Bluebirds pack together in bird boxes, as many as twelve sharing the box. Ptarmigans and ruffed grouse will plunge under loose snow to sleep. Snow buntings may stay under snow both day and night during periods of bitter cold.

*(These fascinating facts gathered from the Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds by John Terres.)*

## BIRD OF THE MONTH

### Scoters: Black, Surf and White-winged

by Bill Holcombe

The scoters are winter visiting birds, traveling along the Atlantic coast from the Gulf of St. Lawrence south to the Carolinas and infrequently to the Gulf States. The most likely place for us to find them is on the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel system from late November into March. It makes sense to discuss all three birds together as while the three scoter species are clearly distinguished by physical differences, their life styles, migrations, and life habits are far more alike than different. These birds are members of the duck family and are classified as diving ducks and sea ducks.

The dominant color of all three derives from the solid black body with differences in the bill face, white placements on the head and, in the case of the White-winged Scoter, white wing patches. The White-winged Scoter is larger and heavier than the other two on average but there is overlapping in the Whitewing's lower measurements.

The male **Black Scoter** is a solid black duck with a heavy, bright orange bump on the base of its black bill. It is 17 to 21 inches long with a wingspan of 30 to 35 inches. The female is dark brown

with whitish cheeks and throat. These ducks tend to hold their bills level or slightly tipped up and not downward as is true of their cousins. The Black Scoter is also distinguished from the other two by a melodious cooing vocalization labeled courlou by some. (John McDowell and I thought that it sounded more like a soft, wailing sound.) The male utters a mellow whistle during courtship and nesting. The female has a similar but more grating vocalization.

The male **Surf Scoter** is also mostly a solid black duck but with a bright white marking on the brow and on the nape of the neck that has given it a nick name, "skunk duck." The bill is white with orange markings and the eyes are white. The female is dusky brown with two lighter spots that are not always clearly visible on the side of the head. The Surf Scoter's name comes from a preference to swim just beyond the breaking waves. This is the most numerous and widely distributed of the scoters breeding in North America. In size it closely corresponds to the Black Scoter. The male has a liquid, gurgling call during courtship.

The male **White-winged Scoter** is also basically a black duck with a square white patch at the base of both wings and with a white tear shaped patch just below its white eye. The bill is orange with a black knob at the base of the upper mandible. The female is a sooty brown with the same square white patches at the base of both wings and with two light patches on the face. Both sexes send out a whistling note during courtship and nesting. This is the most common Scoter on the New England-Long Island coast and has been counted in masses as large as 180,000.

The rest of the story applies to all three species: Scoters winter along both coasts and sometimes past the Carolinas to the Gulf States. They also winter on the Great Lakes and scattered inland bodies of water in some interior states. They arrive late in October-early November and leave early in March. However, the non-breeding ducks usually stay on the winter grounds. They fly in large groups, sometimes with little formation but more often in long lines and sometimes in V-formations. The flights are accompanied by a whistling sound believed to be made by the beating of the wings.

They make long flights to nesting grounds on lakes and ponds across the far north, ranging from

Alaska, across Canada, to Newfoundland. Nests are shallow scrapings in gravelly areas which are then lined with down from the scoters. Eggs are laid June to August with some variation in the size of the clutch. The White-winged Scoter can lay as many as 17 eggs, whereas 6 to 7 is usual for the other two species. Incubation takes 28 days and young fly in about 46 days.

On their winter grounds shellfish form the major part of the scoter's diet. They can dive 25 to 30 feet below the surface to obtain blue mussels, clams, oysters, scallops, periwinkles, limpets and other shellfish. One examined stomach of a Black Scoter contained 78 mussels. A White-winged Scoter feeding over an oyster bed near Olympia, Washington had ten oysters in its gullet. The strength and adaptation of the scoter's gullet in grinding up these shell fish is amazing. There is also a danger of clams closing their shells on the bird's tongue.

On the nesting grounds the ducks adapt to eating fresh water mussels, crayfish, rock crabs, hermit crabs, spider crabs, tadpoles and fish. They also eat grass and seeds.

I have not found or seen any references to the endangerment of these ducks. They are apparently not hunted to the extent other ducks are and have carved out habitat niches in which they flourish. If you take a trip out to Island 4 of the CBBT you can get a good look at these handsome birds for yourself.

*Reference: The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds by John Terres*

## **THANK YOU TO WILD BIRDS UNLIMITED!**

Based on sales to our members during the October 2001 to December 2002 period, Wild Birds Unlimited have donated \$457.28 to the club. We hope club members will continue to shop there for their birding supplies, as this donation will help fund our annual grant to a William & Mary graduate student for research on birds.