



# THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

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March 2004

## PRESIDENT'S CORNER

March 20th is the first day of spring, the astronomical season which starts when the sun is directly over the equator. This does not automatically bring a change in the climatic season, however, and we have experienced many snowstorms in late March and even in April. Nevertheless, all our thoughts turn to the harbingers of spring as we near the vernal equinox. According to the VIRGINIA WILDLIFE calendar, doves begin nesting March 5th, our first flycatchers return March 9th, the warbler migration begins March 26th, purple martins arrive March 28th and the woodcock courtship flights begin March 29th. That is a whole lot of good birding news.

To get ready, I suggest that the first thing you do is to clean out your bird boxes. Bluebirds started seeking nesting sites in late February! Then brush up on your bird songs. Listen to tapes or CDs while you drive to and from work. If you are new to this form of identification, try listening to only one group, like the warblers, over and over again. Your ear will become attuned to their songs and even if you can't id the bird from the song alone, you will know that there is a warbler present and can get your binoculars on it before it flies off. Then you can go back to the tape/CD and find the song you heard and look in your field guide for the bird you saw. It takes a lot of practice to get good at this, but is well worth the effort in increasing your enjoyment of bird watching.

Alex Minarik

## MARCH 17 MEETING

Join us Wednesday, March 17 at 7:30 p.m. in Room 117 of Millington Hall on the William and Mary campus when VSO President Teta Kain visits and delights us with her slide presentation, *Adventures on the Dragon*. Hers is an account of the many interesting types of plants and animals that are found along the river called Dragon Run on the Middle Peninsula. You might especially

enjoy the account of her adventures while photographing on the river at night in her kayak and her eyeball-to-eyeball shots of frogs, toads, and spiders in lamplight!

Teta is the current president of Friends of Dragon Run and also serves as the organization's paddlemaster, leading canoe/kayak trips down the river for various groups. She also serves as a member of the board of directors for the Butterfly Society of Virginia and she recently concluded a 6-year term on Gloucester County's Wetlands Board.

## MARCH 27 FIELD TRIP

Join Vineyard's resident Randy Coleman as he leads club members around the The Vineyards. Meet him at 7:30 at the Vineyards Clubhouse. (Note: this is the fourth Saturday in March, a week later than our usual third Saturday.) Likely birds to look out for: late winter residents like Hermit Thrush plus early spring migrants like Common Yellowthroats, Yellow-throated Warblers, and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers. Directions: Follow the VDOT signs to the Vineyards. Turn left at the second entrance. Follow the main road around to the right. The Clubhouse is on the left just before the lake.

## MARCH 20 HIGHWAY CLEANUP

Marc Meiring will lead the club's effort Saturday, March 20, to clean up the length of Route 5 that the club is responsible for in the VDOT Adopt-A-Highway Program. An early start is important so that most of the litter can be picked up before traffic is too heavy. If you're tired of seeing trash and litter on the side of the road, here's your chance to do your part. Meet Marc at the McDonalds on Route 5 (Five Forks area) at 7:15 a.m. We'll get organized and plan to be on the road by 7:30. Only thing you need to bring with you is a pair of gloves. Wear sturdy shoes/boots. Marc has everything else. Thanks, Marc, for leading this effort.

## **APRIL 21 CLUB MEETING WITH BILL WILLIAMS**

Plan to join us Wednesday, April 21, at 7:30 p.m. in Room 117 at Millington Hall when local expert Bill Williams addresses the club about colonial and beach-nesting waterbirds including herons, egrets, ibis, gulls, terns, Black Skimmer, Wilson's and Piping Plovers. The focus will be on what we have learned over the last 30 years about these species populations, and results of the 2003 comprehensive survey of this complex of birds. Currently, Bill is Director of Education for the Center for Conservation Biology at William and Mary.

## **FIELD TRIP TO DISMAL SWAMP**

Mark this day on your calendar. This trip in April will be one of the year's highlights. Be prepared for an early start since the drive is about an hour.

## **FEBRUARY FIELD TRIP**

Tom Armour reports that the group had a good trip on the York River Saturday, February 21. Participants: Dave Anderton, Eleanor Young, John & Mary Anne Fennell, Charles Rend, Bill Holcombe, Carolyn Lowe, Emedio Bracalente, and Bill Williams.

Highlights were 8000+ Ruddy Ducks close by in great light. The huge raft contained 134 Redheads (the largest number I've seen in Virginia). Canvasbacks, Buffleheads, and Lesser Scaup were also in the rafts. Other good birds were three Red-necked Grebes and a good look at a Red-throated Loon that was accompanying a Common Loon. We also observed the Bald Eagles working on their nest at College Creek. The group had a total of 40 species.

## **GREAT BACKYARD BIRD COUNT**

Did you participate in the Great Backyard Bird Count? If so, your data along with the data from tens of thousands other birders tell ornithologists how the birds in Virginia and across North America are faring over the long term.

Folks in Williamsburg reported 75 species and submitted 77 reports. Virginians reported 165 species and submitted 1,644 reports. Virginia ranked 7<sup>th</sup> among states in submitting the most checklists and reporting the most birds. Virginia ranked 10<sup>th</sup> in reporting the most species. Virginia Beach ranked 4<sup>th</sup> overall in cities reporting the most birds.

Across North America, participants reported 549 species, 4,229,762 individual birds and submitted 41,333 reports (as of February 27). Wow! Thanks

for your participation.

Most frequently reported species, listed in order were: Mourning Dove, Northern Cardinal, Dark-eyed Junco, Blue Jay, Downy Woodpecker, American Goldfinch, House Finch, House Sparrow, Tufted Titmouse and American Crow. For more details, go to: <http://www.birdsource.org/gbbc/>

## **VSO TRIP TO OUTER BANKS**

By Shirley Devan

When Dorothy Whitfield and I started out Friday afternoon, February 6, on our trip to the Outer Banks, it was raining. The farther we drove, the harder it rained. We kept telling ourselves that the forecast for Saturday was for clear skies, but Friday afternoon's weather was far from ideal for bird watching. About 50 other birders from across Virginia arrived in Kill Devil Hills Friday night with the same Saturday weather forecast in mind. We gathered in a crowded, steamy hotel room to hear trip leaders Jerry Via and Bill Akers brief us on birds we were likely to see Saturday as well as birds that we would be more than lucky to see. (Both Jerry and Bill are former students of Ruth Beck's and they are great birders and field trip leaders/teachers! Thanks, Ruth, for doing such a great job with these two!)

Saturday morning dawned cold, clear, and WINDY! Officially the birding started at 8:00 when the two groups left the hotel for southern island destinations. Unofficially, the birding started about 7 a.m. as folks meandered out to the hotel's oceanfront deck to see the beach area. At one point about 60 people braved the bitter wind to check out the Brown Pelicans, Northern Gannets and gulls.

Jerry and Bill each led a group of birders to various spots on the Outer Banks – most of which were in the Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge. One exception was the Oregon Inlet Fishing Center where we got great close-up views of about a half dozen roosting Black-crowned Night Herons just off the parking lot. Jerry assured us that more were hidden in the brush. This area also featured Greater Black-backed Gulls, including a dead one that Jerry picked up to display the great wing span of these birds. We also spotted a Peregrine Falcon (zooming in for a landing on a tower) and a Tri-colored Heron.

The area had been cleared of the debris from Hurricane Isabel, but the foliage on the shrubs close to the ocean was stripped. The strong winds had just ripped the leaves right off the bushes! This impacted the number of Yellow-rumped Warblers (among others) in the area this winter. According to Jerry Via, there are usually



thousands but the numbers were noticeably down this year because of the stripped foliage. The ponds at Pea Island were filled with Pintail Ducks (hundreds, if not thousands) as well as (among numerous other species) Tundra Swans, Northern Shovelers, Lesser Scaup, Mallards, a beautiful Bufflehead and a Savannah Sparrow (which gave us great close-up looks in the open.)

One of the highlights was seeing the nesting Great Horned Owl. The female had chosen an Osprey platform and nest about 50 yards from the highway to lay her eggs. Nothing obscure or camouflaged about this nest! She was out in the open for all to see. And she can spot predators a mile away! Bill and Jerry warned us to stay on the opposite side of the road and not to get too close because she was very protective and easily disturbed. Surprisingly, she



Alex Wilke exhibited this delightful image of a Oyster-catcher chick in her presentation at the February Bird Club meeting.



Can you find the Great Horned Owl's nest here?

was accustomed to cars racing past at 60 miles an hour. They explained that the owlets will fledge before the Osprey is ready to lay her eggs – so the birds are into “time shares” as well down there.

Back at the hotel, the group gathered to tally the count for the day – a total of 98 species. The group had 103 species last year. Notable “missing in action” birds were Terns (only one seen, a Forster’s), Sandpipers, Sanderlings, Woodpeckers (only Downys and Flickers seen) and American Robin (only one seen).

On Sunday Dorothy and I braved even windier conditions as we returned for more great looks at the Black-crowned Night Herons and the Great

Horned Owl. Then we headed for home and warmer weather. All in all, a great weekend of birding with some great folks and outstanding leaders. I heartily recommend this annual winter birding trip to the Outer Banks. You’ll have a great time and see some stunning birds.

## CONSERVATION CORNER

By Dan Cristol

As anyone who has driven along Monticello Avenue knows, the College Woods was devastated by Hurricane Isabel. The silver lining is that College researchers have a new and interesting study of how these storms do their damage to forests and how the forests and their inhabitants recover. Unfortunately, the College has decided to “salvage” the fallen trees using heavy machinery. The motivation seems to be to recoup some income from the woods and to avoid having lumber “go to waste.” Rather than letting the trees rot in place where they would return nutrients to the forest and provide homes for birds, a contractor will pierce the woods with small roads to pull out the fallen timber from every corner with heavy vehicles that compact soil and damage living trees. This will create erosion and permanently open up more of the woods to mountain bikers, as well as creating a big disturbance to wildlife and recreationists during the operation. The plan is not fully in place, so now would be a good time to weigh in with letters to college administrators or the newspaper so that every viewpoint is heard.



## ARMOURS' TRIP TO FLORIDA

Tom and Jeanne Armour spent the first two weeks of February in Florida and report these highlights: "We had a total of 107 species – 13 herons, ibis, egrets, and one crane (all the waders except the Bitterns) – including one Scarlet Ibis that we've seen the last 3 years in Ft. Meyers. We had 15 species of waterfowl, the best being 500+ Redheads, the most I've ever seen, and 22 species of shore birds. The best location was Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge on Sanibel Island – it was full of birds – 100+ Roseate Spoonbills, the most we've ever had there, and some were close up. Also saw 150+ White Pelicans. There were only three species of Warblers, too early for migrants I guess. Also had a Snail Kite and a Mississippi Kite, but missed the Swallow-tailed Kite. I-95 traffic was very light both ways; had good weather, even got a swim in a heated pool, and saw old friends. All together, a great trip."

## YRSP AND THE BLUEBIRD TRAIL

York River State park, location of 41 Bluebird boxes monitored by Bird Club volunteers, has been closed since September 18 and Hurricane Isabel. Contractors with heavy equipment have been on site to clear fallen trees from trails and roads. Safety issues have barred visitors and prevented the club volunteers from checking the status of the boxes – until January 30.

Chris and Tony Dion have been in regular contact with the park staff since then to determine when they could check the status of the boxes. The last week in January they received an invitation to take an escorted tour. On a cold January 30, the park intern, Beth, took Chris on the Meh-te-kos Trail where many of the boxes are located. All were accounted for but one – Box 34! Meanwhile, Tony checked the boxes along the main road. All were present and accounted for except for an old one that needed replacement anyway.

According to Chris Dion on January 30: "The Meh-te-Kos trail is badly blocked and in some places completely different from how it was before the hurricane. We can get to all the boxes, but we will have to use the road, as so many trees are gone! Box 34 has disappeared, probably covered by a fallen tree or removed by crews clearing debris. Beth [the intern] has walked Taskinas Creek trail and says it is also badly affected. The big bridge is in three pieces and the other bridges have moved! The osprey platform out in the York River is gone, but part of the pole remains."

On February 19, Chris & Tony were admitted to the park again to put up two new boxes,

straighten out several others and trim around the boxes. According to Chris, "It is quite amazing the amount of work done on the Meh-te-Kos Trail since our last visit. The entire trail is walkable and major amounts of tree debris have been removed. The YRSP staff deserves many kudos for a job well done! They are to be commended for a job that doesn't gain recognition from the users of the park or DCR."

Chris sent an email to Bill Williams of the Center for Conservation Biology asking if they could help YRSP staff put the Osprey platform back in the river outside the visitor center.

They appear to be on schedule to open the park on 1 March 2004. Hurrah!

Chris and Tony deserve a big "thank you" for stepping up to the plate in January and February and getting the bluebird trail in shape for the spring. The volunteer group will start checking the boxes around mid-March. If you want to volunteer to look in bluebird boxes, send email to Shirley Devan at: [sedevan52@cox.net](mailto:sedevan52@cox.net).

## FEBRUARY BIRD SIGHTINGS

**February 1:** Shirley Devan reports: Today my sister and I spotted five Bald Eagles and one Kestrel at the District Park Sports Complex off Longhill Road. There were two adult eagles and three juveniles cavorting and circling over the mulched debris on the left side of the main road. The Kestrel was hovering over the weedy area at the back of the park behind the far concession stand.

**February 5:** Diana Nolan reports: "We have been seeing bluebirds for a couple of weeks around town. Now they are in our box fighting it out with chickadees!"

**February 6:** Dan Cristol reports: Two Rufous Hummingbirds (a male and a female) at a Queen's Lake hummingbird feeder all winter were still feeding happily as of February 6. The male was still present as of February 26.

**February 7:** Dan Cristol reports: one beautiful immaculate adult lesser black-backed gull was at the mud flat at Jamestown Island where the Powhatan creek comes under the bridge to join the James River.

**February 7:** Tom McCary saw 8 to 10 White-crowned Sparrows at Shirley Plantation.

**February 10:** Bill Holcombe reports: A Sharp-shinned Hawk sitting on my bird feeder support.

**February 20:** Terry Johnston and Shirley Devan got good looks at the Bald Eagle and her nest at the Norfolk Botanical Garden. The nest is in a very visible, accessible location – the paved path passes directly under the nest – and the eagle is

easily disturbed. The staff says they will close the path when she starts incubating her eggs. The nest is also directly across from the observation tower. A scope on the tower would provide great views (almost nest level) without disturbing the birds.

**February 20:** Tom McCary saw Green-winged Teal, Gadwall, Ringneck Ducks, Brown Creeper and a Red-tailed Hawk around College woods and Lake Matoaka.

**February 21:** Bill Holcombe reports: After a great morning with Tom Armour on the York River, I stopped to check the pond at the Vineyards. Not a single duck ... or anything else.

**February 21:** Bill Williams reports: I had 3 Red-necked Grebes on February 21 at Yorktown. Also there that day was an adult Northern Gannet and both Red-throated and Common Loons. At Felgates Creek there were 151 Redheads mixed in among hundreds of Ruddy Ducks, a couple of Canvasbacks and 6-8 Lesser Scaup. The next day, Sunday, February 22, I had a calling King Rail at the Green Springs Trail and two female Common Mergansers at College Creek.

**February 23:** Bill Holcombe reports a Brown Creeper in his yard.

**February 24:** Tom Armour reports: flock of 150 Canada Geese in a large "V" formation, very high and north bound – first real migration I've seen this year.

**February 26:** Emedio Bracalente reports: I see the following birds regularly. Some of them I see every day and some two or three at a time, the rest I spot every few days if I happen to be looking around outside. Most of these birds were seen on GBBC: White Breasted Nuthatch, Tufted Titmouse, Eastern Towhee, Chipping Sparrow, Mourning Dove, American Goldfinch, Northern Cardinal, Blue Jay, American Robin, House Finch, Carolina Wren, Dark Eyed Junco, Red-breasted Woodpecker, Hairy Woodpecker, Downy Woodpecker, Northern Flicker.

**February 27:** Tom Armour reports six Killdeer at Williamsburg Airport – "first ones in a couple of months – maybe spring is coming."

**February 29:** Joe and Grace Doyle report that their February visits to Camp Peary have generally been disappointing. Joe is wondering where all the birds are. Even the starlings, grackles and cormorants are scarce! Today they did see about 20 Brown Pelicans on the York River – unusual to see them this far upriver. Joe reports that the Bald Eagle pair has been active around the nest, and the female seemed to be sitting low in the nest (eggs?) on the 15<sup>th</sup>. They report that they've seen Eastern Meadowlarks every Sunday but today. Brown-headed Nuthatches have returned to nest in one of the two

dead trees left in an area wiped out by the hurricane. White-throated Sparrows and Dark-eyed Juncos are still here. The pond had about 150 Ring-neck Ducks, two Gadwalls, a few Widgeon, and Hooded Mergansers.

His general theme is the scarcity of birds so far this year. Joe did report that the area lost many trees to Hurricane Isabel. Work crews have been clearing down trees as well as the undergrowth that so many birds depend on. The impact is already being seen.

**February 29:** Tom Armour, Brian Taber and Bill Williams had 85 Tundra Swans pass over College Creek at about 12:30 p.m. There was a Lesser Black-back Gull on the sand bar at College Creek too.

**March 2:** Joe Doyle spotted an Osprey.

## OWL GETS NEW EYE LENSES

February 12, 2004. Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. - A great horned owl found starving in the wild because it had gone blind could be released this spring after having new lenses implanted in its eyes. The owl, named Minerva by medical personnel, underwent two hours of eye surgery Jan. 22, and Dr. Chris Murphy said she was in good condition during a follow-up exam Wednesday.

"Perfect," said Murphy, a board-certified veterinary ophthalmologist. "Ounce for ounce, this is considered one of the toughest birds on the face of the earth."

Minerva was found in emaciated condition in early December after someone told wildlife rehabilitators, Sue and Jerry Theys, that an owl had been sitting on a fence for three days.

Sue Theys, who netted the owl, said she suspected the owl had cataracts. After a local veterinarian confirmed the diagnosis, the couple brought the owl to Murphy at the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Veterinary Medicine.

Murphy had a pair of lenses on hand that had been custom-made six years ago for another great horned owl that proved to be an unfit candidate for the surgery. The lenses were designed by Murphy and Dr. Chuck Stuhr, and were made for free by Storz Ophthalmics, a company that has been bought by Bausch & Lomb.

With Murphy supervising, Dr. Renee Carter and fellow resident Katie Diehl implanted the new lenses. "To the best of my knowledge, this has not been done anywhere," Murphy said.

The Theyses, who operate Wildlife of Wisconsin wildlife rehabilitation, paid for \$300 of the \$1,800 procedure, with the veterinary school

donating the rest.

During her recovery, the Theys have been giving Minerva antibiotic eye drops three times daily and feeding her rats and an occasional rabbit. In April, they will move the owl to a much larger flight cage and release live rats into the straw-filled enclosure to see if she can successfully hunt. If so, she'll be released back into the wild.

Great horned owls are the largest owls in North America, with females obtaining a wingspan of five feet and weighing up to 5 ½ pounds. They use night vision and an acute sense of hearing to find prey in the dark.

"She's extremely feisty," Sue Theys said. "She can't understand why we're messing with her. She can see and she wants to take off and fly."

## **COLLEGE CREEK HAWKWATCH UNDERWAY FOR THE 8<sup>TH</sup> YEAR**

By Brian Taber

College Creek Hawkwatch, sponsored by Coastal Virginia Wildlife Observatory, got off to a good start, for the 8th consecutive season, on February 20th. The hawkwatch, located on the James River, 3 miles south of Williamsburg, is the only regular late winter and spring hawkwatch in Virginia.

Hawks and vultures are counted as they cross the river heading northward, from a point of land at Hog Island Wildlife Management Area in Surry County. Over the previous 7 years, the "birds per hour" average is 12. Birds cross the river mainly in mid-morning on the initial warming of the air.

Last year, coverage on 71 days, from mid-February to early June, yielded 1414 birds of 14 species.

February 20th, a burst of warm air brought a daily site record of nine Red-tail Hawks across the river, along with 17 Turkey Vultures, a Cooper's Hawk and a Red-shouldered Hawk. Hundreds of gulls and blackbirds were also headed north across the river. Several Brown Pelicans, which have become regulars at the site, were also recorded.

There is an active Bald Eagle nest at the site. Hurricane Isabel destroyed a duck blind there, which has hosted nesting Ospreys for many years.

Thanks to volunteer Bill Williams who was also on hand. Visitors and other volunteers are welcome. For directions and more details, contact Brian Taber directly at [Taberzz@aol.com](mailto:Taberzz@aol.com).

## **WELCOME TO NEW MEMBERS**

Welcome to new members, Mary Anne and John Fennell. They joined us at the February meeting. By the way, if you receive an envelope with this newsletter, it's a signal that your dues for the year are due NOW. Please send your membership dues to Chuck Rend, Treasurer, Williamsburg Bird Club, PO Box 1085, Williamsburg, VA 23187.

## **BIRD CLUB'S WEB SITE**

Visit the club's web site and check out the "web links" to Nest Cams: [www.wmbgbirdclub.com](http://www.wmbgbirdclub.com). With owls and eagles already nesting, several web cams are up and broadcasting. The web camera at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology web site has a live web camera on a Barn Owl's nest box in California that had two eggs as of February 29. As spring arrives more nest cams will go live, so check out the links on a regular basis.

## **THANK YOU, DR. CRISTOL**

You've probably enjoyed Dan Cristol's engaging and educational monthly articles in The Virginia Gazette. Dan generously contributes his \$25 monthly stipend from The Virginia Gazette to the Williamsburg Bird Club. As you probably know, Dan is a biology professor at William and Mary and an active member of the Bird Club. Be sure to read his "Conservation Corner" in this month's newsletter. Thank you very much, Dan, for your generosity and support.

## **WILD BIRDS UNLIMITED CONTRIBUTES TO BIRD CLUB**

Wild Birds Unlimited in Williamsburg and owners George and Val Copping donated \$357.45 to the club in February. This represents a percentage of the purchases by the Bird Club members from January 2003 to January 2004. George and Val have supported the club for years and are great resources for what's going on with the birds in this area. We are grateful for their continuing and generous support and we are also grateful to the club members who patronize their store throughout the year.