



# THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

Volume 28, Number 2

February 2004

## PRESIDENT'S CORNER

Backyard birding can be enjoyed by almost anyone. Basically all you do is put up a feeder and look out the window. I have seven feeders: two tubes, two hoppers, one tray, one cage and one suet log. I also have a bird bath with dripper, lots of trees and a swamp behind my house. All of these things equate to a very nice variety of birds for me to enjoy without leaving my house. In January, when the post-holiday, mid-winter doldrums set in for many, I'm happily starting my new year's yard list. So far in 2004, I've seen 28 species in my yard and since moving to my house six years ago, I've had over 80 different species. I use the V.S.O. Birds of Virginia checklist card to facilitate my record keeping. The card has two columns. I use one column to check off yard birds and the other to record birds I see statewide. Try keeping track of your yard birds this year and you, too, might find the long winter days really can pass by quickly. — Alex Minarik

## FEBRUARY 18 MEETING

Join us at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, February 18 to hear about "American Oystercatchers on Virginia's Barrier Islands: An Update" from Alex Wilke, W&M graduate student in biology. Alex has received the club's research award in the past. She is completing her thesis and will receive her M.A. in biology in the spring. Alex spoke to the club last February about her initial research into Oystercatchers and will provide the latest data at our February meeting.

## UPCOMING CLUB MEETINGS

Wednesday, March 17: Teta Kain, President of the Virginia Society of Ornithology, will present "Adventures on the Dragon (Run)." Visit the Williamsburg Bird Club web site for a preview of Teta's presentation and more information about her adventures in Gloucester County.

Wednesday, April 21: Bill Williams, one of our local expert birders and Director of Education for

the Center for Conservation Biology at William and Mary, will talk to the club about "Gulls, Terns, Cormorants, Etc."

## FEBRUARY 21 FIELD TRIP

Saturday, February 21: Tom Armour will lead the group to the York River via the Colonial Parkway to observe the waterfowl. The York River should have good numbers of ducks and loons by late February. Meet at 8:00 a.m. at the Colony Square Shopping Center (Fresh Market is located in this shopping center) parking lot on Jamestown Road.

## VISIT OUR NEW WEB SITE

By the time you get this newsletter, the bird club web site will be operational. Go to: [www.wmbgbirdclub.com](http://www.wmbgbirdclub.com).

You'll be able to see upcoming meeting and field trip dates as well as links to other birding and wildlife sites. Later we'll add some additional features and capabilities. Now you are able to give us some feedback, see some web links to other birding web sites and post your own sightings in the forums.

To enter your own bird sightings from your yard, neighborhood or travels so that other members can know what you're seeing, click on "Forums" in the left column. A box labeled Forum appears. Then click on "Local Bird Sightings." There you'll see other "postings" members have entered recently. To see the details of what others have posted, click on one of the individual postings. You can also post your own reply to someone else's posting. (Ignore the Login boxes at the bottom of the window.)

To enter your own sightings, click on "New Topic." In the "User Name" box, enter your name as you want it to appear in the posting. In the "Title" box, enter something like a headline to briefly describe when and what you've seen. Here is a sample: February 10: Hermit Thrush at my feeder. In the next box, you can add more details about your sighting or your trip. Ignore the three

boxes in the lower portion that start with "Disable." You may Preview your information to double check that you've typed what you want. Then, press the "Submit" button. Your entry will be posted so anyone who comes to the forums can see your information.

Call Webmaster Shirley Devan at 220-6269 in the evenings if you have questions or need assistance about any part of the web site. Or send email: <sedevan52@cox.net>.

## JANUARY FIELD TRIP

Hog Island was closed because of the "Orange Alert," so Brian Taber led the trip to the James River at College Creek and then to Greensprings Trail. Fourteen birders were in the group: Al and Meg Karb, Bill and Betty Anne Caldwell, Emedio Bracalente, David and Phyllis Lee, Joe Burkart, Carina Young, Alex Minarik, Dorothy Whitfield, Sylvia Shirley and Tom Armour. The weather was good, cold but no wind.

The group found a total of 51 species including a great view of a pair of Bald Eagles at their nest. At Greensprings the best finds were a Common Yellowthroat, Eastern Phoebe, six woodpecker species and Rusty Blackbirds. On the James River they found 14 species of waterfowl – the best being a pair of Common Goldeneye. For a complete listing of all 51 species, check the Bird Club web site: <[www.wmbgbirdclub.com](http://www.wmbgbirdclub.com)>.

## WHEN IT SNOWS

Brian Taber reports on a snowy Tuesday, January 27, 2004: "Whenever it snows or ices a few inches near Williamsburg, the edges of the Colonial Parkway, along the James River, typically melt a bit and attract hundreds of small birds, which can no longer use the nearby fields and forest understory, over a several mile stretch between Jamestown and Williamsburg. Today, January 26th, there was a moderate amount of activity there, including 2 Snipe, dozens of Killdeer, 20-30 American Pipits, 75+ Fox Sparrows, a Savannah Sparrow and dozens each of Cardinals, White-throated and Song Sparrows. The Osprey that was reported on VA BIRD at College Creek, on the parkway and on Jan 24th was there today. The Williamsburg Bird Club printed an annotated bird list in 1998, summarizing decades of records and there are no other January Osprey records.

## CONSERVATION CORNER

by Daniel A. Cristol

### The Value of Citizen Science Projects

Many bird club members participate in our

Christmas Bird Count (CBC) each December. There are 2000 such counts across North America, which draw 50,000 people annually. If you participated this year, on one of the nastiest, rainiest mornings in recent memory, you may be wondering whether it's worth it. This is one citizen science project that really pays dividends. The data from these counts go into a national database that can be accessed by researchers and the public for education. It has some problems as a research tool but is a very important means of tracking trends in wintering bird numbers nationwide. It is an early warning system for population declines and range changes that is unmatched anywhere.

I took a look at the CBC website <<http://www.audubon.org/bird/cbc/>> to see whether these counts had any interesting stories to tell about Williamsburg's bird populations since the inception of our count in 1975. To properly analyze the graphs one generates at this website requires complex statistics, but some species have trends that are so obvious they hit you right between the eyes. Mute Swans, for example, once absent from our area, appeared on the CBC in 1987 and have increased ever since then. Bald eagles, rarely seen in 1975, are now seen by each person on the count approximately every two hours. The eagle explosion is happening over much of Virginia, while the swan increase is local, not mirrored in the statewide totals. By doing the CBC every year we are helping biologists who monitor the invasion of feral mute swans into the Chesapeake, and CBC's serve as cheap, ongoing monitoring of recovering species like eagles.

Some surprising good news from the Williamsburg CBC is the increase in red-shouldered hawks — clearly this species is adjusting to the rapid suburbanizing of our area. Canvasback ducks, recently of great concern to conservationists, have increased since the early 1990's in Williamsburg and statewide, either because they are doing better on the breeding grounds, hunters are killing fewer, or they have moved here from elsewhere in the Bay. Turkey vultures, object of much derision in Virginia (where plans are afoot to kill thousands as pests), are indeed increasing each year on our CBC and statewide. Interestingly, though, the black vulture, widely perceived to be increasing and the chief culprit in many nuisance cases, has not increased in the last 30 years on our count or statewide. And what of our other well-known nuisance, the Canada goose, which is increasing statewide at a rapid rate? Surprisingly, there has been no obvious increase on our CBC in recent decades.

Now for the inevitable bad news. Birds that use fields and shrubby areas are disappearing from

our count so fast that the graphs look like something out of the Enron scandal. Eastern meadowlarks, field sparrows and northern bobwhite are going the fastest. Even mourning doves may be declining here. Fifteen years ago club members stumbled over two meadow larks an hour, whereas we are now seeing less than one every two hours on the CBC. This is the predictable consequence of converting our farms to housing developments. And everyone's favorite, the eastern bluebird, while increasing explosively throughout the state, has stopped increasing in Williamsburg. Perhaps the 200 new boxes we're putting up at William & Mary can get those numbers up again.

Participating in a citizen science project, such as the CBC, Great Backyard Bird Count or even a Breeding Bird Survey for experienced birders, is more worthwhile than ever, now that the data can be quickly disseminated among scientists and digested for public education and effective bird management. Log on to <http://www.bird-source.com/index.html> for more citizen science projects.

## **JOY ARCHER MIGRATION STUDIES FUND**

The estate of Joy Archer has made a donation to Coastal Virginia Wildlife Observatory, a non-profit organization that Joy was very fond of. According to Brian Taber and Ruth Beck of the CVWO: "We are very touched, but certainly not surprised, by Joy's generosity and love of wildlife. Because of the donation and a wish to honor Joy, the Observatory Board created the Joy Archer Migration Studies Fund. The Fund will provide resources to help the Observatory, founded in 1994, to carry out its mission for long-term field research, public education and land conservation."

The planned uses for the fund include: granting student field research scholarships; printing materials such as special reports, brochures, and checklists; funding for field trips for school groups; and funding field research studies.

The Observatory invites you to contribute to the growth of the Fund and to an organization that Joy cared about very much. If you would like to make a donation, send it to the CVWO Treasurer, Bob Ake, PO Box 912, Eastville, VA 23347.

## **WELCOME TO NEW MEMBERS**

Williamsburg Bird Club welcomes new members Holly Lang, Rich Scherer and Carina Young. The Treasurer, Chuck Rend, also thanks all renewing members for their promptness in sending in their 2004 dues. If you have not yet mailed your annual

dues, please do so soon so you'll continue to receive *The Flyer* every month.

## **CLUB DONATIONS TO LOCAL GROUPS**

At its meeting January 7, the Club's Board of Directors voted to increase donations to two local organizations. In 2004 the Club will donate \$175 to the Coastal Virginia Wildlife Observatory and \$150 to the Williamsburg Land Conservancy. The Club will also donate \$100 to the Center for Conservation Biology at William and Mary, and \$125 to the Williamsburg Regional Library for the purchase of birding books. The Club is also a member of the Virginia Society of Ornithology and pays dues of \$25 per year.

## **THANK YOU FROM RUTH BECK**

Please accept my warmest thank you to all the members of the Williamsburg Bird Club for their thoughtfulness with the presentation of the beautiful owl print and the proclamation of appreciation plus a life time membership. Best of birds for the New Year.

Fondly, Ruth Beck

## **TRIBUTE TO JOHN HERTZ**

John Hertz, Past President of the Williamsburg Bird Club, died January 20 in Williamsburg. John was president in 1984, shortly after he and his wife Eleanor moved to Williamsburg in 1981. The club extends its sympathies to his family and sends its appreciation for his service and years of support to the club.

## **TWO MUST-HAVE BOOKS**

If you bird in Virginia, you must have the "Discover Our Wild Side: Virginia Birding and Wildlife Trail" series published by the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries. These jam-packed volumes are free for the effort of making a phone call - 1-866-VABIRDS. Two spiral-bound volumes feature the "Coastal Area" and "Mountain Area." The Virginia Birding and Wildlife Trail is the first of its kind in the United States.

A phone call in December to request the "Coastal Area" volume resulted in an unexpected surprise - BOTH books arrived in the mail after 2 or 3 weeks. The Mountain Area volume is the most recent addition to the series.

The Coastal Area volume is 100 pages and features 18 trail loops; the Mountain Area

volumes 200 pages and features 34 trail loops. Each trail description contains driving directions, a map, a list of the sites, the public facilities at each, phone numbers for site contact, web site, access fees if any, and the wildlife (birds and others) that you're likely to see and the best season to visit. For example, the Williamsburg area is included in the Lower Peninsula Loop, which features 15 sites ranging from York River State Park to Grandview Nature Preserve in Hampton, with Jamestown Island, Colonial Parkway, and Greensprings Trail plus others in between.

The books are sprinkled with "Wildlife Watching Tips" and "Wildlife Facts." So grab your Birding and Wildlife books and hit the road!

## GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

Bill Holcombe recently handed off his responsibilities as a vice-president and co-editor of *The Flyer*. And although he left the job in the very capable hands of Shirley Devan, it would be criminal for me (his co-editor) not to say a few words of praise recognizing Bill's many years of service to the Williamsburg Bird Club.

My tenure in the club dates back to 1994 and at that time Bill was the program chairman. One night that year he announced that we were in need of a volunteer to produce the Flyer — Dave and Lee Schuster, who had done it for a long time were played out. Bill evidently was expecting a long, drawn-out search to find someone to replace them, and when I spoke up from the front row to offer my services he was floored. He didn't know me then and was not aware that I knew very little about birds. What I should have said was that I could *edit* and *produce* a newsletter from material furnished largely from other contributors. Bill didn't want to lose me though and offered to help me with the writing. People with the necessary computer skills were not so easy to find back then. After he completed his term as program chair and at my suggestion the board made him a vice president and co-editor. And so began a collaboration that has endured to the fall of 2003.

Clubs like ours live in cycles. Leaders wear out and a club's fortunes wax and wane. Thinking back to my early days as a member, I realize now that Bill came forward at an important time. Officers were weary and in need of relief. He breathed life into an organization that needed some revitalization. I was new then but sensed how important the newsletter was to the continued health of the club. Bill used to run a gauntlet of friendly criticism from Bill Sheehan and Joy Archer every month. They kept us on our toes and drove us to produce the best newsletter

we could. And believe it or not, there are members now who say they join each year just to receive *The Flyer*!

Shirley and I hope Bill will still contribute an occasional article to *The Flyer* as well as continue to participate in club activities. We miss ya, Bill!  
— Phil Young, Co-Editor

## WILLIAMSBURG AREA BIRD SIGHTINGS

By the end of January the longer days were having some impact on the birds. There was clearly more bird chatter on early morning walks and the Mourning Doves have rather tentatively started their first spring cooing. All of this occurred despite the snow and ice toward the end of the month.

To report your sightings call Shirley Devan at 220-6269 or send her email at: <sedevan52@cox.net.>

**Jan. 5:** Bill Holcombe sees a pair of Hooded Mergansers on the Rte.199 – Rte. 5 pond and 5 Red-breasted Mergansers on the James River near the Glebe Gut a few days later.

**January 6:** Tom McCary reports a Phoebe at Shirley Plantation.

**Jan. 8:** A mature Bald Eagle flies across Rt.199 near the Longhill Road exit and Bill Holcombe sees his first of the year Hermit Thrush and very large Barred Owl while walking his dog. (The owl appeared two more times this month.)

**January 9:** Lee Schuster reports two male Purple Finches at her feeders the 2nd week of January "it may have been the 9<sup>th</sup>."

**January 10:** Tom Armour: "Today at my feeder, one Hermit Thrush----also today on a frozen field on Treasure Island Road, 10 Eastern Meadow larks and 5 Killdeer."

From Stonehouse, Diana Nolan reports flocks of Cedar Waxwings feeding on her pear trees with a Brown-headed Cowbird and a Pileated Woodpecker near her feeder. Also had an exceptionally large flock of 18 Robins and two Red-shouldered Hawks on her walk.

Same day, Shirley Devan saw a Hermit Thrush at feeder.

**January 11:** Tom Armour at the Vineyards: 1 Hermit Thrush, 1 Pied-billed Grebe, 35+ American Robins, 1 Black-crowned Night Heron, 2 Northern Mockingbirds, 6 Black Vultures, 1 Eastern Towhee, 8 Turkey Vultures, 50+ Chipping Sparrows, 1 Fox Sparrow, 2 Black Ducks, 3 Song Sparrows, 2 Mallards, 6 White-throated Sparrows, 1 Red-tailed Hawk, 10 Dark-eyed Juncos, 1 Pileated Woodpecker, 2 Northern Cardinals, 6 American Crows, 1 Carolina Chickadee, 1 Tufted Titmouse, 1 Carolina Wren, 2 Eastern Bluebirds; 12 Ring-necked Ducks.

A flock of Canada Geese crossing the James River

at the Colonial Parkway stops Bill Snyder's car, "65- 75 birds."

**January 12:** From Ruth Beck: so far in 2004 – Pine Siskin; 2 adult Bald Eagles at one spotting looking for injured waterfowl as they kept harassing the ducks and geese; about 50 American Goldfinches daily at the 8 feeders; a Brown Thrasher comes daily and feeds on woodpecker mix; Hermit Thrush at base of feeders near good cover.

Jean Morris in Skipwith has had frequent visits to her feeder by a Baltimore Oriole.

**January 13:** Tom Armour sees 17 Ring-necked Ducks and 7 Black Ducks at the Vineyards.

**January 15:** Phil Young reports Greater Yellowlegs at low tide in College Creek below Port Anne; Shirley Devan reports a Kestrel on the utility wire on Olde Towne Road near fire station.

**January 17:** Tom Armour at the Vineyards –1 Gadwall, 5 Black Ducks, 1 Purple Finch, 75 Chipping Sparrows, 1 Yellow-rumped Warbler; Bill Holcombe reports another visit from the Barred Owl.

**January 18:** Bill Holcombe reports Red-shouldered Hawk in his yard plus a Hermit Thrush.  
January 19: Jim Booth finds Ring-neck Ducks and 2 Bufflehead on the pond at the 13<sup>th</sup> hole of the Plantation Golf Course; Tom McCary had an extended, perfect postcard view of two adult Bald Eagles sitting in the same tree by the James River at Shirley Plantation.

**January 20:** Shirley Devan sees a Northern Harrier flying across the highway on Rochambeau High-way near Bruton High School.

**Jan. 21:** Jim Booth sees a first Brown Pelican over Kingsmill Landing on the pond in the West Landing Section.

Chris & Tony Dion report a Peregrine Falcon at their yard feeders. Posed for about 30 minutes and provided great views; Alex Minarik reports a Hairy Woodpecker and a Pileated Woodpecker in her yard.

**January 24:** Tom McCary reports a Pine Warbler investigating his feeder, but not partaking.

**January 25:** Joe and Grace Doyle birded Camp Peary and found 28 species, mostly from their car because of the bitter cold (temperature about 22 degrees!): Eastern Bluebird, Northern Cardinal, Carolina Chickadee, Cormorant, Crow, Mourning Dove, Ruddy Duck, Mallard, Hooded Merganser, Canada Geese, Mute Swan, adult Bald Eagle, Pileated Woodpecker, Northern Flicker, Great Blue Heron, Blue Jay, Dark-eyed Junco, Kingfisher, Mockingbird, Chipping Sparrow, Fox Sparrow, Song Sparrow, White-throated Sparrow, Black Vulture, Turkey Vulture, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Carolina Wren, American Robin.

Shirley Devan has a Hermit Thrush and a Yellow-rumped Warbler at her feeders along with the

usual Titmice, Chickadees and Juncos.

**January 27:** Brian Taber reported an Osprey at College Creek on the Colonial Parkway, a rare January sighting.

**January 28:** Alex Minarik reports that there were around twenty Scoters at Yorktown Beach this morning. "They were all Surf Scoters, as far as I could tell. I thought one was a Black, but then I lost him. I also saw a single Dunlin at Indian Fields Creek on the mud flats where about a dozen Tundra Swans were hanging out. Along the Colonial Parkway were dozens of Killdeer, Water Pipits, Fox Sparrows, Cardinals, Towhees to name a few. Also saw two Brown Thrashers. On the road was one Sharp-shinned Hawk standing on a dark, small bird, presumably a Junco. These are just the highlights of a wonderful morning birding from Jamestown to Yorktown and back along the parkway."

Since Jan. 12 Jean Morris in Skipwith area has had frequent visits to her feeder by a pair of Baltimore Orioles. She has seen them several times a week for the past few weeks. While they mostly feed on a suet cake containing fruit (bought at Wild Birds Unlimited) they will from time to time take seed from a tube feeder. Jean has put out orange halves on a holder but the suet is the primary attraction.

Tom McCary reports a Yellow-rumped Warbler at his suet feeder and foraging on the ground underneath.

**January 30:** Tom McCary reports a female Eastern Towhee at his tube feeder.

**January 31:** Alex Minarik reports: "Today I went over to Surry via the ferry to look for waterfowl at Sunken Meadows. To my dismay, it was totally frozen over. I drove the back roads to Brandon and found that all the water over there was frozen too. But the open farmland provided some interesting habitat and I ended up with 48 species for the day. The highlights were 24 Meadow larks, 12 Water Pipits, 2 Horned Larks, 10 Bobwhite Quail, 1 Red-headed Woodpecker, over 20 Red-tailed Hawks, 1 Kestrel and 1 Northern Harrier. I finally found some open water after crossing into Charles City Co. over the Benjamin Harrison Bridge. There is a large pond on the left off of Rt. 106 where the large red utility building is located. There I saw 4 Common Mergansers and 6 American Widgeons among other ducks."