



THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

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Website: www.wmbgbirdclub.com

February 2005

PRESIDENT'S CORNER

By Alex Minarik

Where have all the birds gone? I am asked this or similar questions often enough to conclude that something is going on. But the extent and implications of the changes can only be determined through controlled scientific studies. The Great Backyard Bird Count and Project Feeder Watch, both conducted by Cornell Lab of Ornithology and Audubon, are designed to do just that with the help of citizen scientists from all over North America. The GBBC runs for 4 days in mid-February (see related article); Project Feeder Watch is a more extensive study that runs from November to early April. Both can be done from the comfort of your home. If you are concerned about the changes you see in your backyard bird population, I urge you to participate in one or both of these studies. As the website says, **EVERYONE'S CONTRIBUTION IS IMPORTANT.**

SEND YOUR ANNUAL DUES

The Club Treasurer, Chuck Rend, reminds all members that annual club dues are now due. Please use the envelope enclosed with last month's newsletter to mail in your dues. If you've lost the envelope, mail your check to WBC, PO Box 1085, Williamsburg, VA 23187. Here are the membership levels: \$35 for patrons, \$25 for families, \$15 for individuals and \$5 for students. Consider joining this year at the Patron level to support the club's activities, scholarships and organizations the club supports – Williamsburg Land Conservancy, Coastal Virginia Wildlife Observatory, Center for Conservation Biology at W&M, Williamsburg Regional Library and the Virginia Society for Ornithology.

FEBRUARY 16 MEETING

Our January meeting was cancelled because of the icy roads, so VP of Programs, Tom McCary, has rescheduled Holly Lang, William and Mary biology graduate student, for our February 16 meeting. Holly will share her research on the "Effects of Global Warming on Spring Migration."

Holly grew up in Pennsylvania and earned her undergraduate degree from Ohio University in Athens, Ohio. She will receive her M.S. in Biology in the spring. While at William and Mary, she has also researched the breeding patterns and habits of Eastern Bluebirds.

Plan to join us Wednesday, February 16, at 7:30 p.m. in **Room 211** at Millington Hall at William and Mary to hear how our spring visitors are reacting to global warming.

Note: Our room assignment at Millington Hall has changed to Room 211 for this semester, upstairs from our usual room. Feel free to use the elevator up to the second floor.

FEBRUARY 19 FIELD TRIP

Tom Armour will lead the group to Hog Island Saturday, February 19. Meet at 8:00 am at the Colony Square Shopping Center parking lot (near The Fresh Market) on Jamestown Road. The group plans to take the 8:30 ferry (in case anyone wants to meet the group at the ferry.) However, car pooling is probably a good idea due to security restrictions near VA Power's Surry power plant.

JANUARY FIELD TRIP

Tom Armour led an intrepid group into the cold to look for birds on the James and York Rivers, Saturday January 22. The early birds, in addition to Tom, were: John and Mary Ann Fennell, Phyllis and David Lee and Alex and Mike Minarik. Highlights were: great close up looks at a Common Loon, a Belted Kingfisher perched on a bridge railing, Tundra and Mute Swans, 2 Adult Bald Eagles on the James. A Barred Owl flew across the Parkway as they were en route to the York River, where they found 10 waterfowl species. Good birding lasted until the sky started spitting rain and snow late morning.

WILD BIRDS UNLTD. SUPPORT

Wild Birds Unlimited in Williamsburg and owners George and Val Copping donated \$190 to the club in January. This represents a percentage of the purchases by the Bird Club members for the last six months of 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. When club members purchase items there, let the sales person know you are a member of the Williamsburg Bird Club. Thanks to Wild Birds Unlimited and to the club members who patronize the store throughout the year.

CRISTOL DONATES TO CLUB

In addition to the wonderfully interesting articles Dan writes for our Club newsletter, he also contributes a column to The Virginia Gazette on a regular basis. Dan donates his stipend from the Gazette to the Bird Club. Thanks, Dan, for *all* your contributions.

WELCOME TO NEW MEMBERS

Williamsburg Bird Club welcomes new members Frances McDaniel and Kimberly Sutton. We look forward to seeing you at upcoming meetings and field trips.

FYI:

- Check our web site for cancellation announcements – www.wmbgbirdclub.com > Cancellation of the January 19 meeting was posted at 4:50 p.m. that afternoon.
- Our meeting room at Millington Hall has been changed for the semester to Room 211.
- February is Wild Bird Feeding Month. The Williamsburg Public Library on Scotland St. will have a display all month.
- The Red-tailed Hawks in New York City, Pale Male and Lola, are exhibiting mating behavior and building their nest on the “elegant stainless steel lacy cradle” installed in late December by the co-op board.
- The Bird Club is selling beautiful, colorful enamel Red-headed Woodpecker lapel pins to raise additional funds. The pins will be available at the February meeting. They will cost \$5 each and are suitable for men or women.

LISTER'S BLISTERS – THIRTY BIRDY MINUTES

By Bill Williams

If you have a feeling of normalcy when you watch Seinfeld, or the Orange Bowl half-time show seemed too black-and-white, or T. J. Maxx never has your size or color, here's a birding strategy to recapture your spirit. Grab your binoculars, those portable windows into the world, and go to your favorite outdoor out-of-the-way place to spend a half hour finding and recording every bird you can. Take thirty birdy minutes. Over time you'll find it's as easy and comforting as a good merlot with

chocolate.

Thirty birdy minutes is immensely rejuvenating. As soon as you arrive at your thirty birdy minute destination, record the time, temperature, and weather conditions. The next 1800 seconds will become a challenge of wits and skills to detect by sight or sound all the birds in the vicinity. Every bird gets attention. Every bird gets recorded, and with each visit every species is new. Suddenly, Ring-billed Gulls, fly by Mourning Doves and singing Common Yellowthroats ascend from the mundane to the must find, thus achieving the appreciation they deserve anyway. Where is that Carolina Chickadee heard the last visit? Wow! A flyover Common Loon. Weren't those Cedar Waxwings just now? The Tree Swallows are back! Is that early? I wonder what was here an hour ago? The great thing about this activity is that your surroundings have to have your undivided attentions. Everything else is rendered temporary, or maybe even permanent, unneeded mental clutter. And, because your slate is clean each time you start, no visits are ever repetitive. For thirty birdy minutes, priorities shift from “have to” to “what's next!” because, just when you think you have noted all the species to be had, one will enter your detection zone to be added to the tally. A favorite thirty birdy minutes place is the College Creek pull-off from the Colonial Park-way. Without much of a stretch, this stop is “on my way to work” so to speak. Since work is at William and Mary, stopping at that creek is rationally justifiable, and therefore without guilt. Secondly, this location offers a mixture of habitats: a forest across the way, a brackish/fresh water tidal marsh, the James River and a broad reach of open sky. Another great haunt for this pastime has been the marina at Queens Lake, as it too offers quieting waters, marsh, and mature forest. Sometimes the cacophony of avian voices there can be at once an overwhelming challenge and primal inspiration. At College Creek from 1 November to 6 December, 62 species were recorded in 11 visits, including Bald Eagle, Cooper's Hawk, Clapper Rail, Virginia Rail, Wilson's Snipe, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Great Horned and Barred owls and Marsh Wren. The single best 30 minutes was 20 November with 34 species.

As you become immersed in the essence of thirty birdy minutes, prioritizing a time niche for it should diminish, and time of day actually becomes an enticing ally for the adventure. Crepuscular morning and evening when birds are just waking or set to retire for the night can be fantastic. But mid-morning and late afternoon can be very productive too. That's one of the most compelling features for this activity. You'll discover a curiosity about such things and then find the time to get the answers. As all consumer products must, thirty birdy minutes has to have a warning.

You may find that sometimes 30 minutes becomes 35 or 40 or ... Well, at least the federal government recognized the need for such things and legislated days just for your benefit. If you find that the birding is just too good to pull yourself away then go ahead ... devour an hour! It's worth every birdy minute! When you finish send your list to Shirley and to eBird. (www.ebird.org/content).

UNUSUAL BLUEBIRD BEHAVIOR

By Shirley Devan

I eat breakfast each morning looking at the bird feeders just outside the window. These days the sun comes up about 7:30 so I have only a few minutes to watch the birds before heading out to work. Wednesday, January 19, I spotted birds never before seen at my feeders – Eastern Bluebirds. Five individuals were frantically swarming all over the suet feeders, the sunflower tubes and on the ground. They were perching on top of the “shepherd hooks” holding the feeders, waiting their turns at the suet and sunflower seeds. I was in “shock and awe.” I started checking with other bird club members and discovered that Bill Holcombe saw bluebirds at his feeders on January 17 and again on January 24. First season I have seen this” says Bill.

Then Dorothy Whitfield reported that she saw the first one on her feeder January 18. This prompted her to put out her mealworms on the 19th and 10 minutes later she had two males and one female. Phil Young reported two bluebirds at their feeder on Jan 18. “They don't often visit our feeder anytime of the year,” according to Phil. The next morning, January 20, I saw five bluebirds again at my feeder at the same time – 7:30 a.m. This was the morning after the surprise snow/ice storm that canceled our club meeting.

When I was in Wild Birds Unlimited Saturday, January 22, I mentioned the phenomenon to George Copping and other staff. They reported that LOTS of people had reported bluebirds at their feeders that week. Clearly, something unusual was going on with bluebirds this week. According to Dan Cristol, “In my opinion this is unusual, and the bluebirds may have strayed too far north because of the warm weather, and now have been caught by surprise. That's all I can think of. I've not had any at my feeders, this year or ever.” Brac Bracalente reports that he has not had bluebirds at his feeders.

On the other hand, Alex Minarik reports, “I have had up to 8 bluebirds coming to my suet log and suet cakes since before Christmas. They also go in and out of the birdhouse. I guess they are roosting in it.” Also, Diana Nolan reports, “We have been seeing bluebirds since around New Year's day at our suet feeders. We've also seen them along the road coming into Stonehouse, usually perched

atop a bluebird box.” Ruth Beck reports, “I have bluebirds at my feeder regularly. They eat the sunflower hearts and peanut bits.”

What are common birds for some backyards are clearly unusual for others. Consider participating in the Great Backyard Bird Count or Project Feederwatch. Also, please send your backyard birds sightings (usual and unusual) to me for the newsletter. As Alex says in her President's Corner, “everyone's contribution is important.”

BIRD SIGHTINGS – JANUARY 2005

Report your backyard birds and local sightings to Shirley Devan at 220-6269 (evening phone) or sedevan52@cox.net (home email). If you encounter interesting birds on your vacation/travels, please share!

January 2: Eleanor Young reports from the Newport News City Park bird walk: Pileated Woodpecker, Northern Flicker, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Mallards, Canada Geese, Ring-billed Gull and Lesser Black-backed Gull.

January 6: Dorothy Whitfield reports a female Pileated Woodpecker in her yard.

January 10: Tom Armour reports: at Sunken Meadows Pond (in Surry County), one Eurasian Wigeon, 25 American Wigeon, 800+ Gadwall, 50 Ring-necked Ducks, 6 Hooded Mergansers, 2 immature Bald Eagles playing tag.

January 11: Tom Armour reports: today at the airport 6 Eastern Meadowlarks. At the Vineyards, 1 Red-shouldered Hawk, 9 Bufflehead, 8 Ring-necked Ducks, 15 Chipping Sparrows, 3 Song Sparrows, 10 Yellow-rumped Warblers. On Treasure Island Road, 500+ Red-winged Blackbirds, 10 Brown-headed Cowbirds, and 1 Red-tailed Hawk.

January 16: Joe and Grace Doyle report from Camp Peary: several hundred Ring-necked Ducks on Beaverdam Pond; Buffleheads on the York River; Hooded Mergansers, Bald Eagles engaged in nest building, Northern Harrier, American Kestrel, Tundra and Mute Swans, Eastern Meadowlarks. Notable missing species: Killdeer and Red-headed Woodpeckers.

January 16: Eleanor Young reports highlights from the Newport News City Park bird walk: two adult Bald Eagles, Brown Creeper, Red-winged Blackbird, Red-tailed Hawk, White-throated Sparrow, Song Sparrow, Ring-necked Ducks, Tundra Swans. She reports her feeders attract Winter Wrens, Carolina Wrens, Song Sparrows and American Robins.

January 17: Brac Bracalente reports: I was walking in New Quarter Park from Queens Lake on Jan 17, late afternoon, and saw a Bluebird sitting on one of the bluebird houses that line the

road in the park. He flew to a nearby tree as I passed the house. Thought it was unusual to see one this early but I had heard they sometimes winter over. It may have been blown in by the past weekend storm. It was real cold and I hoped he was keeping warm. Maybe he was checking out the houses. I have not seen any at my feeders. I live in Queens Lake and very seldom see them in my yard although I see them down the street from me in the summer time.

January 17: Tom Armour reports: at the Vineyards today, 31 Ring-necked Ducks, 7 Bufflehead, 1 Red-tailed Hawk, 15 American Robins, 1 Field Sparrow, 1 Brown-headed Cowbird, 4 Yellow-rumped Warblers, 25 Red-winged Blackbirds and 2 Turkey Vultures on the ground.

January 17: Bill Holcombe reports: I was watching Bluebirds on my suet cake (first season I have seen this) along with Pine Warblers, Yellow Rumps and the usual back yard crowd, and hoping that the bright yellow bird that had appeared in a flashing instant the day before would return. I guessed that it was a Yellow Warbler but had no chance at any identifying mark. Then – BLAB – a Yellow Warbler was sitting on the deck rail head on with the reddish stripes on the breast clearly visible apparently staring at me from 12 feet away. It then grabbed onto the suet cake and fed for a few moments revealing a somewhat darker back. How sweet it is!

January 19, 20: Shirley Devan reports Bluebirds at the backyard feeder at 7:30 a.m. – on the suet, on the ground, on the sunflower tube feeders. Also, on the 19th, Bluebirds in the trees around the office on Olde Towne Road.

January 20: Bill Snyder had Hooded Mergansers on Powhatan Creek in front of his house and the Mute Swans have returned after several week's absence. Bill also was struck by an earlier June-like January day when he had 13 species at his feeder. This was followed late in the day by a very large 4 point buck deer nosing the feeder and then staring straight into the picture window at him!

January 20: Dorothy Whitfield reports that as many as three males and one female Purple Finch have visited her feeders since January 2. She also reports a Hermit Thrush this date.

January 20: Tom Armour reports: today at the Vineyards pond, 50 Ring-necked Ducks, 7 Bufflehead, 2 Mallards. On the James River near College Creek, 1 Brown Pelican, 10 Red-breasted Mergansers, 2 Hooded Mergansers, 2 Black Ducks, 1 Killdeer on the parkway.

January 21: Tom Armour reports: yesterday & today I had a Hermit Thrush at my suet feeder.

January 21: Alex Minarik reports: Today I had 2 Pine Warblers at the suet. I've also had a Mockingbird hanging around for the past three weeks. I rarely ever have one here. It likes the suet too. Wednesday (Jan 19) before the snow there

was a Brown Thrasher at the seed feeder and a Song Sparrow in my yard. I should have known that we were in for some bad weather by all the activity! Now it is difficult to keep the feeders filled, especially the suet.

January 23: Shirley Devan reports 15 species at backyard feeder station on the day icicles were dripping from the feeders. Highlights were Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Hermit Thrush, White-throated Sparrow and a Red-shouldered Hawk who buzzed the feeder before perching about 25 feet away to wait for lunch to reappear.

January 24: Bill Holcombe reports: The Bluebirds were back on my feeder but they had to share with another bird that I have never before seen on my suet ... a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. And as it twisted around to get at the suet I was able for the first time in my life to actually see THE YELLOW BELLY!

January 25: Tom Armour reports: six Eastern Meadowlarks at the airport.

January 26: Tom McCary reports from his walk around Lake Matoaka: a number of Green-winged Teal and Gadwall. Several were walking on the ice and Tom got good looks at the Gadwall's yellow legs. Also, 7 Hooded Mergansers plus a Belted Kingfisher and the usual winter woodland birds.

January 29: Shirley Devan (windshield birding) reports two adult Bald Eagles above Longhill Swamp near Lafayette High School. Birds were chasing each other and interlocking talons. Mating behavior?

January 29: Tom Armour reports: today at the Vineyards pond, 7 Bufflehead (5 beautiful males), 1 male Hooded Merganser, 1 Ring-necked Duck, all in a small area of open water. The rest of the pond is frozen over. Also, 1 Belted Kingfisher. Also, today on the James River, 1 Brown Pelican, 2 Common Goldeneye, 6 Ruddy Ducks, 3 Red-breasted Mergansers, and 1 immature Bald Eagle.

January 30: Tom Armour reports: this afternoon at the Vineyards Pond, a pair of Greater Scaup, 4 Red-necked Ducks, 3 Buffleheads and nearby, a flock of 50+ American Robins.

SPANNUTHS' TRIP TO NEW ZEALAND AND GANNETT COLONY

By Herb Spannuth

My wife Beverly and I recently spent several weeks vacationing in New Zealand.

One of the highlights of our trip was a visit to the Gannet Colony (October 22) at Cape Kidnappers, which is on the East Coast of the North Island at

Hawke's Bay near Napier. New Zealand guide-books describe this location as the largest and most accessible mainland gannet colony in the world. Following a 1-hour ride with "Gannet Safaris" on a 4-wheel drive vehicle to get to the cliffs at the end of the Cape, we had the pleasure of viewing, from a distance of 8-10 feet from the edge of the colony, hundreds of nesting gannets for over an hour. We got to see them flying in and out, displaying, courting, nest building and mating.



Gannets

We also visited the Yellow-Eyed Penguin Conservation Reserve, which is located near the end of the Otago Peninsula on the East Coast of the South Island, southeast of Dunedin. As their web site www.penguin-place.co.nz indicates, they provide a tour that allows visitors to view and photograph the penguins via a system of hides, tracks and tunnels. While we were there (November 11), we saw about 6 or 8 penguins on nests (a few with chicks), saw one young penguin



Yellow-Eyed Penguin of New Zealand

standing on a nearby hill and watched one come out of the water, cross the beach and head toward the conservation area. Additional information about the species from the above web site:

Yellow-eyed Penguins gain their name because of their yellow iris and the characteristic yellow head band. They live in New Zealand and are one of the rarest penguins in the world with only about 5000 - 6000 individuals left. About one quarter of these live in the east coast of the South Island and Stewart Island. The rest live on Campbell and Auckland islands, about 600 km to the South. The Yellow-eyed Penguin is different from other penguins in many aspects of its biology and is the only penguin species that does not become tame. They originally nested in the coastal forest but their distribution is now restricted to forest remnants and coastal shrubs after extensive logging during the last 150 years.

We also saw a number of other new (for us) species. Some of our favorites were the Fiordland crested penguin, royal albatross, royal spoonbill, tui, spur-winged plover, paradise shelduck with their young and New Zealand scaup with their young.

FLORIDA'S WAKODAHATCHEE WETLANDS

By Linda Scherer

January 22 – I just returned from my winter respite in Florida (regretfully far too short!) and thought I'd share the highlights. Our favorite local spot there, Wakodahatchee Wetlands, is hosting a pair of Spot-breasted Orioles and a foursome of Black-bellied Whistling Ducks this winter. We saw both on one exciting day in December. Purple Gallinules and Soras also were seen on almost every visit. At Merritt Island NWR on Jan. 20, I was treated to the sight of a flock of Roseate Spoonbills. They were feeding along with a large number of Little Blue Herons and the intermingled colors were so beautiful that I regretted not having a camera with me. Also, I got a great look at a Florida Scrub Jay.

So I got home in time for miserable weather. My reward was that my backyard feeders were very busy and included visits from Pine Siskins and a Red-breasted Nuthatch. My husband had been very good about keeping the feeders filled while I was enjoying my final week in Florida.

THE GREAT BACKYARD BIRD COUNT IS BACK

The 8th annual great backyard bird count invites everyone to go out and count for the birds in America's great backyard. During the weekend of February 18 through 21, people across the North American continent are encouraged to count the birds in their backyards and report them over the internet, as part of the Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC), one of the world's largest volunteer efforts of its kind. In addition to its value as a research study, the GBBC allows people of all ages and backgrounds to celebrate birds and provide vital information about North America's birds.

This is the eighth year of the popular event, developed and managed by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the National Audubon Society, with sponsorship from Wild Birds Unlimited store owners. This year's theme, "North America's Great Backyard," was chosen as a way to celebrate the beauty of birds found across the continent. People are encouraged to enjoy the birds around them by going out into the "Great Backyard" during any or all of the count days and keeping track of the highest numbers of each bird species they see. People then report their sightings over the internet at www.birdsource.org/gbbc.

"We call it the Great Backyard Bird Count to make the point that anyone can participate," says John Fitzpatrick, director of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. "But really, a 'backyard' can be

anywhere you happen to be, a schoolyard, a local park, the balcony of a high rise apartment, a wildlife refuge. No matter where you go in this 'Great Backyard,' you're almost certain to find birds in all their beauty. By participating in the Great Backyard Bird Count, you can help researchers better understand bird population numbers and distribution across the continent."

"Taking part in the Great Backyard Bird Count takes as little or as much time as participants wish," says Audubon's director of citizen science, Paul Green. "The important thing is to just take part, count the birds and enjoy North America's Great Backyard."

Instructions for participating can be found at www.birdsource.org/gbbc. There's no fee or registration. Those who would like to participate but who aren't online can try their local library. Also, many Wild Birds Unlimited store owners who are online will be accepting observations made by their customers.

Here's what you do:

- Count the birds in your backyard, local park, or other natural area on one or all four count days. You can count in as many different locations as you wish — just make sure to keep separate records and fill out a checklist for each area.
- Watch the birds for at least 15 minutes on each day that you participate. We recommend watching for a half-hour or more ("thirty birdy minutes"), so that you'll have a good sense of what birds are in your area.
- How to count: Your data will be used by scientists to analyze bird populations, so it is very important that all count their birds in exactly the same way. On the day(s) that you count, watch your bird feeders or take a short walk (less than 1 mile) in your neighborhood or park.

For each species of bird that you see, keep track of the highest number of individuals that you observe at any one time. Use a "tally sheet" to help keep track of your counts. Your tally sheet should look something like the following:

- o House Finch - 3, 5, 3, 1 _ High Count = 5
- o Blue Jay - 1, 3, 6, 2 _ High Count = 6

Be careful not to count the same bird over and over! Don't add another Blue Jay to

your tally every time you see a Blue Jay at the feeder. You could be seeing the same individual again and again. If you record only the highest number of individual birds that you see in view at one time, you're sure to never count the same bird more than once!

- At the end of the day go to "Submit your bird checklist" on our GBBC web site. Fill out the questions about your location, local habitat and count duration. Then enter your high counts for each species sighted on that day and location. You can submit one bird checklist for each day that you count or for each new area that you count in. For example:
 - o If you count all four days at one location, you'd submit four different checklists.
 - o If you count on four days at two different locations each day, submit eight checklists. And so on.
- Problems getting access to the Internet? Many libraries, schools, bird clubs, and other community-based groups will be helping, too. If you have problems getting to the internet, call Shirley Devan at 220-6269, who will enter your data for you. Or check with Wild Birds Unlimited in Williamsburg.
- Finally, after you've submitted your data, explore the GBBC site. Check the results section to see other reports from your community and watch as data come in from other areas. Enjoy!