

THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

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Website: www.wmbgbirdclub.com

January 2006

PRESIDENT'S CORNER

By Bob Long

Thanks to the New Quarter Park staff for opening the park and assisting in the Christmas Bird Count. A cloudy, drizzly, cold day greeted us as we set up for counting. Sara Lewis (park staff) and I identified some 16 species over a 7 hour period. The highlight for our day was a Red-shouldered Hawk patrolling the marsh seeking a meal. That evening we attended the compilation ceremony at W&M and marveled at the ability of birders who not only identified, but counted hundreds of birds.

Just a few days later I spotted 22 bird species in our Queens Lake back yard. This included a Red-shouldered Hawk who paced about our lawn terrorizing the small birds. The hawk was later spotted in a nearby tree enjoying his meal. This just goes to show you don't have to endure hardship to enjoy birding.

As we begin the New Year, let's think of ways to encourage public awareness of nature's gifts and thus increase the club membership. Happy New Year!

TIME TO RENEW YOUR MEMBERSHIP

The Club Treasurer, Chuck Rend, reminds all members that annual club dues are now due. Please use the envelope enclosed with this news-letter to mail in your dues by January 31. If you've lost the envelope, mail your check to WBC, PO Box 1085, Williamsburg, VA 23187. Here are the membership levels: \$15 for individuals, \$25 for families, \$35 for patrons 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.

JANUARY 18 MEETING

Plan to join us Wednesday, January 18, at 7:30 p.m. in Room 117 at Millington Hall at William and Mary to hear about the "Effects of Human Disturbance on Eastern Bluebird Breeding Success." Our presenter will be Caitlin Kight, a graduate student in biology at William and Mary and one of the recipients of the 2005 William Sheehan Ornithology Research Grants.

FEBRUARY 15 MEETING

Our February 15 presenter will be Ariel White, also a graduate student in biology at William and Mary and the other recipient of the club's 2005 William Sheehan Ornithology Research Grants. The topic of her presentation and research is "Mercury Effects in Kingfishers and Eastern Screech Owls."

JANUARY 21 FIELD TRIP

Join us Saturday, January 21, 2006 for the club's field trip to Newport News Park. Tom Armour will lead the group to the varied environs of one of the largest municipal parks in the country. We'll be looking for woodland birds as well as ducks on the reservoir. Species count could be between 30 and 40 depending on the weather and how long we're out. This will be a good day to increase your list for 2006. Look ahead in this issue of the newsletter for the results of Fred Blystone's New Year's Day visit to the park.

Meet the group at 8:00 AM at the parking lot at Colony Square Shopping Center on Jamestown Road (near the Fresh Market). If you want to meet our group at the park at about 8:30, we'll park in the parking lot nearest the Park Headquarters and Visitor Center.

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

Angie Daniel and Margie Sargent are new club members who have joined in the last month. Welcome, Angie and Margie! We look forward

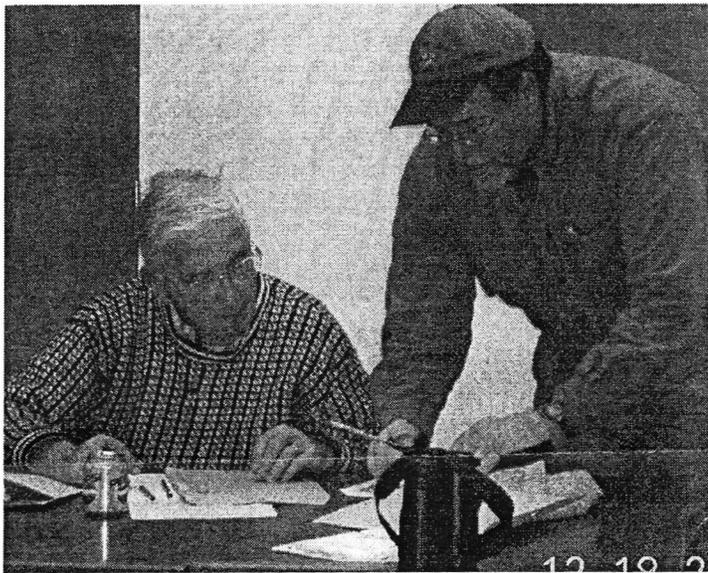
to seeing you at the 2006 meetings and trips.
Thanks for joining!

2005 CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

By Bill Holcombe

Despite the early morning drizzle with temperatures in the high 30's and Brian Taber's party being barred from Hog Island because of the guards' snafus about the security arrangements, the results of the day were quite satisfactory. The number of participants at 33 was higher than usual and the 113 species identified was also slightly higher than average.

At the late afternoon compilation of reports in



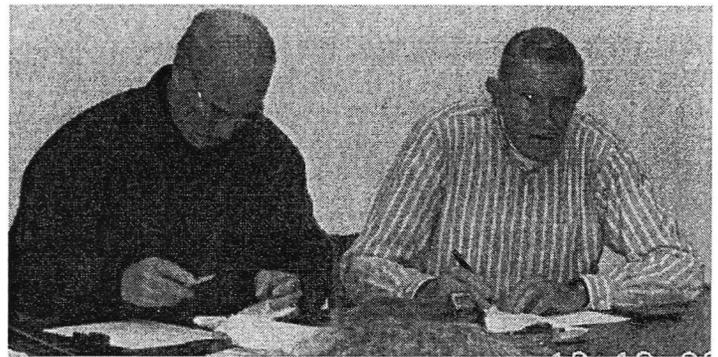
At the end of the day Bill Holcombe and Hugh Beard compile Bird Count data.

the William and Mary Biology Department, there is always high interest in what unusual species turned up. And this year we had quite a few. Essentially, we start with a list of species that history tells us will likely be spotted by the end of the day. The add-ons were Cackling Goose (the tiniest of the Canada Goose family), Eurasian Widgeon, Long-tailed Duck (the Old Squaw until a few years ago), Common Merganser (which is not very common around here), Caspian Tern, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Red-breasted Nuthatch and Clapper Rail. Some of these birds have made the Christmas list at rare intervals, but we believe that the Cackling Goose and the Eurasian Widgeon may be first timers.

While not rare to the list, the numbers of American Robins and their appearance, everywhere was quite unusual. Those reported in the regular count totaled 414 and were heavy in all line areas. Then Dan Cristol waited until after 5

o'clock to visit a roosting area between Bruton Parish Church and the Whaley School. In the roost he estimated 7,000 Robins, 45,000 Grackles and 1,000 Starlings. We also missed some birds that are more often than not seen at least in small numbers – Blue-winged Teal, Northern Shoveler and Northern Pintail. The closing of Hog Island probably influenced this. Quail continued to be absent which has been true for several years. A complete compilation will appear in the February newsletter.

The participants in this all day search were Tom Armour, Hugh Beard, Kathy Bearogn, Ruth Beck, Fred Blystone, Dan Cristol, Shirley



Bill Williams and Bob Long audit their groups' lists.

Devan, Grace Doyle, Joe Doyle, Gary Driscoll, Mary Ann Fennell, Bettye Fields, Jane Frigo, Bobby Giese, Ron Giese, Nancy Gruttman, Bill Holcombe, Bob Long, Carol McAllister, Paul McAllister, Michael Meyer, Alex Minarik, Bart Paxton, Sandra Peterson, Mary Pulley, Dave Schuster, Lee Schuster, Dave Shantz, Dot Silsby, Fletcher Smith, Sam Skalak, Brian Taber, Bill Williams.

DECEMBER BIRD SIGHTINGS

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

November 29: Bill Williams and Bryan Watts of CCB report that Mitchell Byrd had an eagle recovery today from a bird picked up on 9/21/05 and banded on 5/2/85. The bird was banded as a nestling in the nest HE-83-01 which is on Curles Neck Farm just north of Route 5 and was picked up near Flowerdew Hundred Plantation across the James River. In 20 years the bird moved just over 20 miles.

December 1: Ruth Beck reports: "I have had a Coot on the lake for the past 10 days. It came Monday November 21. Had seven Hooded

Mergansers coming and had a Spotted Sandpiper Thanksgiving day. Kinglets, Hermit Thrush, (actually 3 in the yard), White-throated Sparrows and Dark-eyed Juncos abound. Also have 2 Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers hanging around. An adult Bald Eagle comes daily to check on the whereabouts of the Coot. Maybe the raptor will get a little coot for Christmas!”

December 2: Tom Armour reports 2 nice male Ringed-necked Ducks at the Vineyards Pond, the first this winter.

December 3: Tom Armour reports “the Greater Scaup was back on the Vineyards Pond this AM. At the end of Treasure Island Road, I had 1 Ruby-crowned Kinglet, 3 Field Sparrows, 5 American Goldfinches, 4 Yellow-rumped Warblers and 6 Eastern Bluebirds. Also, at the house, I had a Purple Finch at our feeder today, first one this year.”

December 4: Tom Armour reports, this morning at the Vineyards 3 Bufflehead, 1 Greater Scaup, 1 Ringed-necked Duck, 1 Red-shouldered Hawk and a large flock of Robins, 100+. Also, a Purple Finch at the feeder.

Shirley Devan reports from her wanderings around Longhill Swamp, bounded by Lafayette High, Longhill Road, WISC and Warhill Trail: Pied-billed Grebe, Great Blue Heron, Turkey Vulture, Ring-necked Duck, Killdeer, Gulls, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Downy Woodpecker, American Crow, Carolina Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, Carolina Wren, Eastern Bluebirds, Hermit Thrush, White-throated Sparrow, Dark-eyed Junco, Northern Cardinal, House Finch, American Goldfinch.

December 6: Tom Armour reports this morning at the Vineyards – 10 Ringed-necked Ducks, 3 Bufflehead, 2 Scaup and 1 Pied-billed Grebe.

Shirley Devan reports 5 Eastern Bluebirds around her feeder station in early afternoon on a cold day after snow and rain the previous day. The usual winter suspects brought the total species to 12.

December 7: Tom Armour just had a RED-NECKED GREBE at the Vineyards (mid-morning)!! “First time that I know that one has been there.” Also 6 Ringed-necked Ducks and 1 Ruddy Duck.

December 9: Tom Armour reports this AM on Treasure Island Road – 1 Gray Catbird, 1 American Kestrel, 6 Eastern Bluebirds. At the Vineyards – 13 Ring-necked Ducks, 9 Bufflehead, 1 Greater Scaup and no Grebes.

December 10: Tom Armour reports the Red-necked Grebe at The Vineyards pond at 8:30 at the far end of the left finger of the pond (near a

white boat as seen from the Clubhouse parking lot). There were 19 ring-necked Ducks, 1 Greater Scaup and 8 Bufflehead.

December 11: Joe and Grace Doyle report 36 species on their trip to Camp Peary. Highlights included Northern Harrier, Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Pine Warbler and many Canvasbacks on the York River.

December 16: Alex Minarik reports a single male purple finch in her back yard.

December 20: Tom Armour reports this morning at the Vineyards – 8 Ring-necked Ducks and 6 Bufflehead. At the end of Treasure Island Road, a Belted Kingfisher, 6 Eastern Bluebirds, 1 Swamp Sparrow.

December 20: Alex Minarik reports single female Purple Finch and a Fox Sparrow.

December 21: Fred Blystone stopped by the lake at Powhatan Secondary around 8:00 am. He reports 19 species including Pied-bill Grebe, Mute Swan, Ring-necked Duck, Hooded Merganser, Ruddy Duck, American Coot, Ruby-crowned Kinglet and White-throated Sparrow.

December 21: On the first day of winter Jack and Diana Nolan spotted a Red-shouldered Hawk perched up high facing the golf course at Stonehouse. Then, on Christmas Day, Jack saw a Pileated Woodpecker.

December 22: Gil and Jeanne Frey report strange bird patterns this year so far. “Since we got home from Ireland in late September, we have noticed a definite drop off in visitors to the feeder. Many friends and neighbors are experiencing the same thing. At my husband's office in Williamsburg, the duties of filling the feeder are quite lessened. Any feedback from others on this? Nevertheless, we had a few treasured sightings, namely 4-6 Cedar Waxwings high in the cypress trees and 4 American Robins hanging around for the last week. Also, we spotted a Yellow-bellied Sap-sucker yesterday, 1 Red-bellied Woodpecker and a pair of Pileated Woodpeckers. Last Thursday (December 15) around 4 p.m. a fat Barred Owl was perched on the electric pole guy wire, only 15 ft. from ground. We hear these guys all the time, but it sure was fun to see him in excellent light. Interestingly, when we bought this land, we came into possession of an old surveyor's map from 1800's. They had dubbed our little ravine area as "the place where owls hoot." It's nice to have that continuity for centuries in a place where they can thrive. I still cringe when I hear a luckless rabbit being nabbed ... but the owls have babies, too! We saw the first Dark-eyed Juncos this week and one seedy pair of American Goldfinches. No House Finches yet,

although some friends in the town have many of them at their feeders. Carolina Chickadees and White-breasted Nuthatches are still with us and the occasional Carolina Wren, but no titmice ...very weird.”

December 23: Linda Scherer reports from their condo complex in Boynton Beach, Florida: “We had three varieties of doves sharing some seed in the parking lot: Eurasian collared, White-winged and Mourning. The Eurasian Collared Doves are the most common in the neighborhood now. I actually get a little excited when a Mourning dove shows up. There were 3 White-wings, the most I have seen there at one time. They began to show up in our area just a couple of years ago and are apparently settling in.”

December 23: Shirley Devan reports seeing Red-headed Woodpeckers, Red-shouldered Hawks, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and Gray Catbird at Longhill Swamp by Lafayette High School.

December 25: Linda Scherer reports two male Eastern Bluebirds competing for exclusive rights to the birdbath.

December 26: Fred Blystone reports from Jamestown Island: “I got out to the island at 8:30 and headed towards my favorite bench. But as I approached it there was a lot of activity between the sidewalk and the bushes. I noticed a Fox Sparrow and while I was looking at it I noticed there were a total of four of them. The first thing that ran through my mind was I misidentified the bird, but I then I realized that's a pretty hard bird to mistake for something else. The brightness of the streaking and the other markings as well as the way the birds foraged (it looked as if they were digging holes to hibernate) made me realize they really were Fox Sparrows. I know I have never seen that many within several feet of each other – actually I have never seen more than one at a time. All the birds were having a fun time and then there were none. So I looked over my shoulder and just like I expected, a Sharp-shinned Hawk had landed in a tree. When it left the birds returned. The eagles are working on their nest – one flew over with part of a branch in its talons.

December 27: Joe Doyle reports new and interesting bird behavior in Kingsmill Pond near his house since the pond was drained for repair. The birds have put on quite a show. Now that they have mud flats near their house, he and Grace have seen Bald Eagles, eight Great Egrets in the trees, a dozen Ring-neck Ducks, Ring-billed Gulls, Mallards, Red-tailed Hawks and Red-shouldered Hawks.

December 28 and 29: Phyllis Jennings reports some Buffleheads on Kingsmill pond and a pair

of beautiful Eastern Bluebirds in her back yard from December 23 to January 2 – ever since she hung a wreath with Nandina berries on her back deck.

December 29: Tom Armour reports: “Today I had a male Purple Finch at my feeder for only a few minutes. At the Vineyards, 15+ Bufflehead, 10+ Ring-necked Ducks, 2 Scaup, 1 Pied-billed Grebe. There are still many American Robins in the area.”

December 30: Shirley Devan reports 17 species at Longhill Swamp by Lafayette High School. Highlights include Bald Eagle flying overhead, Red-tailed Hawk, Red-headed Woodpecker, Downy Woodpecker and Northern Flicker.

December 30: Linda Scherer reports a Northern Flicker at the birdbath. On December 31, she reports that a Pileated Woodpecker landed briefly in the backyard, a Brown Thrasher and female Eastern Towhee under the feeder, and all the other "usual suspects," including Red-bellied Woodpecker, Carolina Wren, Tufted Titmice, Carolina Chickadees, White-throated Sparrows, Mourning Doves and White-breasted Nuthatch. Also, lots of activity at the birdbath, including an American Robin.

NEW YEAR'S DAY BIRDING

Is there any better way to start the New Year than by birding?

Eight club members and a guest gathered on the boardwalk at Greensprings Nature Trail between 1 and 3 p.m. to celebrate the beginning of 2006. Overcast skies with temperatures in the low to mid-fifties greeted the group. After about an hour, the sun came out, blue skies appeared, and we counted ourselves lucky to have such a beautifully warm day on January 1. Warmer temperatures seemed to draw out more birds as well. Counting the birds seen on the way from and to the parking lot, as well as the birds seen from the boardwalk over the two hour period, the species totaled 30. Highlights included two adult Bald Eagles flying together overhead, two Red-shouldered Hawks perched on the same snag at one point, approximately 40 Green-winged Teal, a very cooperative Belted Kingfisher, a Brown-headed Nuthatch, Eastern Bluebirds, a Common Yellow-throat, Song Sparrows, a Swamp Sparrow, White-throated Sparrows, two immense deer – one with a six point rack and another with an eight point rack – and a muskrat. Participants on this fine day: Fred Blystone, Shirley Devan, Diana and Jack Nolan, Barbara Phieffer, Chuck Rend, Suzanne Steinke, Dorothy Whitfield and Linda Scott, weekend guest of Shirley Devan.

In separate New Year's Day birding adventures: Bill Williams found a Leconte's Sparrow off the Greensprings Trail. This bird was first observed 27 November at this same location. However, several subsequent attempts to relocate it proved unsuccessful. It has been seen at the base of a large earthen berm now part of the fallow remnants of a former portion of Mainland Farm. The farm is adjacent to the Point at Jamestown housing development, about a mile walk from the entrance to the trail at Jamestown High School.

Tom Armour reported 3 Brant at Yorktown at 10 AM. "They were in one of the roped off swimming areas right in town and seemed to be feeding on material growing on the ropes and floats. 1st Brant I've seen on the York."

Shirley Devan reported 17 species at Longhill Swamp by Lafayette High School. Highlights include Bald Eagle, Red-tailed Hawk, Red-headed Woodpecker, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Downy Woodpecker, Song Sparrow and Brown-headed Cowbird.

Fred Blystone ventured down to Newport News Park for the bird walk sponsored by the Hampton Roads Bird Club. He met Richard and Barbara Hudgins and birded with them for three hours. They found 31 species. The highlights were very good close-up views of 3 Redheads (2 males and 1 female) and of a mature Bald Eagle that did not seem to be bothered by the birders. Fred also reports 3 American Wigeon (2 male and 1 female) and a Common Loon that swam close to where they were birding on the boardwalk.

Tom McCary reported a Pine Warbler and a Red-wing Blackbird in his yard along with the usual suspects.

BACKYARD HABITAT

By Cynthia Long

If I could have just one shrub in my garden, it would be bayberry, *Myrica cerifera* – properly called southern wax myrtle. Abundant grey, waxy berries, although tiny, feed over 40 species of birds—including warblers, pheasants, bobwhite, and quail. Remember when we called the little butter butt "myrtle warbler"? It was well named for its habitat – the soft, sheltering green foliage of the wax myrtle. Now it's named for its rump.

Bayberry is a great plant to conceal your trash cans, to grow as a hedge, or to camouflage a parking area. Have you ever noticed how many different birds you see in a parking lot surrounded by shrubbery? Sometimes I saw

more birds in the parking lots at CW than anywhere else in the historic area. You can prune it into a hedge or a multi-stemmed tree, leave it spreading and unpruned, or even turn it into a handsome topiary. Prune in late winter, after the birds have eaten the fruit, and before it blooms in the spring.

You'll notice fuzzy catkins on some plants in early spring. These are the male blossoms. This is another one of those tricky dioecious species, with male and female flowers on separate plants. Only the females will produce the berries. Bayberry grows best in full sun, but it will also grow in semi-shade, although it develops into a leggy plant, and sets less fruit. It's not fussy about soil and likes wet or dry. I've never noticed any insect pests or disease. It is one of the few plants outside the bean family that fixes nitrogen in the soil.

You can dig starts from a friend who will surely be glad to share this locally abundant native shrub with you. If you have to buy plants, be sure the nursery has labeled male and female plants – you'll need a mated pair. Aren't we lucky to have this lovely shrub growing in our Williamsburg habitat!

CHECKING THE CARDS TWICE

By Tom McCary, January 1, 2006

They say confession is good for the soul, and I do have a confession to make. I keep lists of birds which I observe each year. What a relief to get that off my chest! Perhaps I shall be scorned in some professional circles. "He's frivolous – not a serious birder," some may say. But dare I think it – dare I say it? My humble hunch is that they keep lists too. They just haven't owned up to it yet. Honestly, my lists are pretty tame: Virginia Birds, yard bird. Nothing at all outré.

Until this Christmas. Why not, I thought, check the greeting cards for the birds found there. Others do it. You see, years ago I read an article which related how some armchair birders keep a card checklist. In the comfort of home, warmed by the fire in the hearth, refreshed by a cup of nog, the sedentary birder flips through the greeting cards he's received and meticulously records the results. How civilized it all is. No elements to brave, no overcoat and boots to don. Nothing could be cozier.

Thus in a thoroughly whimsical mood I began the most leisurely Christmas count I've ever undertaken. I daresay I chuckled modestly when I thought of the old adage, "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush." That bit of wisdom was hailed by a sip of the nog again. Inside birding: what a novel concept! It's aesthetically pleasing,

too. The birds are always on display. No one yells, "He just flew away!"

Would you believe that the chickadee topped the list for most individuals seen? No fewer than eight spotted. Seven Canada Geese flew in. One might expect the handsome cardinal to appear, and indeed I counted six. Performing solo were a Blue Jay, a Mourning Dove and a White-throated Sparrow.

Now for such a list it indeed seems appropriate to count exotic birds as well. From the Holy Land, where Christmas began, five white doves of peace flew in. And from Great Britain, an English Robin dropped by, a rarity for Virginia indeed.

Not that many species, you say? Remember quality, not quantity, is what birding is about. As the years pass, your list will grow. Comparisons over time can be made. The term "Christmas bonus" will attain a new meaning.

I don't know about you, but I may just keep this log at the back of my nature notebook. Too fanciful? Perhaps. Yet I enjoyed it.

Don't exchange cards? Simply bundle up, go to your favorite card shop, and take a pen and a small notebook. Leave your binoculars at home.

To be sure I anticipated questions about birds on Christmas card stickers and the Snowy Egret on the first class stamps. I sipped some nog again. I put my fingertips together and pondered, the fire blazing the while. A committee to study the matter? No, no, I think not.

Into deep meditation I sank, my whimsy growing. Suddenly, the obvious answer appeared. Simply make another list: a stamp and sticker list. Check the cards twice, but envelopes fore and aft as well. How easy!

I confess again the satisfaction of listing truly knows no bounds. The prospect delighted me. What joy! The birder turns philatelist – everything connects.

There in my study the warmest glow suffused my soul. The birds on my cards I fancied assumed a life of their own. Nodding, I began to drift off at last, pleased by my confession, thinking and dreaming of the birds of Christmas yet to be.

(Note from the author: The above fantasy was written with an admiring nod and a profound appreciation to Bill Williams, well known for his columns on the varieties of listing.)



Alex Minarik and Lee Schuster visited the landfill during the Christmas Bird Count.