



The Flyer

Newsletter of the Williamsburg Bird Club

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www.williamsburgbirdclub.org

March 2009

President's Corner

By Shirley Devan

I encourage you to join the Virginia Society of Ornithology. Family membership is only \$25. "The Virginia Society of Ornithology exists to encourage the systematic study of birds in Virginia, to stimulate interest in birds, and to assist the conservation of wildlife and other natural resources," according to the web site: www.viriniabirds.net/index.htm

Everyone in our Bird Club should be **for** all of those things! Plus the VSO sponsors weekend field trips to Chincoteague and the Outer Banks each year, awards scholarships to graduate students, conducts ornithology study projects like the Breeding Bird Survey and winter population surveys, publishes a quarterly newsletter and a journal twice a year, **and** holds an Annual Meeting each year at a wonderfully "birdy" spot. Last year the group met at Mountain Lake. This year the Annual Meeting is in Fredericksburg, only two hours away.

In addition to all of these, the VSO sponsors and manages the VA-Birds List serve. You don't have to be a member to participate, but you should join to support the effort. Check out the web site and you'll learn how you can sign up for the List Serve (it's **free**) and start learning about what birders around the state are seeing in their yards and neighborhoods. Find out where the Snowy Owl is (or was in December), where the Calliope Hummingbird is feeding (until last week), where the Golden Eagles are soaring, where the Painted Buntings are in Virginia Beach (even as I type this)—even down to where to park in some cases!

As you know from our local club, birders are a welcoming sort and the VSO membership includes birders at all levels of interest. Everyone is friendly and willing to share. Elsewhere in this newsletter you can read about my adventure last week on a VSO-sponsored Pelagic Birding trip. Alex Minarik went with me, and we probably would not have gone if it had not been sponsored by the VSO.

Check out the VSO. If you're for the birds, then you should belong to the VSO!

March Meeting

Club member Joe Piotrowski will present a program titled "Birding Down Under". He will be talking about his trip November 18th–December 13th, 2008 to the southeastern coast of Australia. According to Joe this will be an unique presentation. There will be contests and prizes awarded—miss this meeting at your own peril!

Joe was born in New Jersey and grew up around Philadelphia. He has a BS degree in Chemistry from Notre Dame, a MS in Entomology from the University of Wisconsin and a MD degree from Hahnemann University Medical school in Philadelphia. He is in practice both at Sentara Williamsburg Community Hospital and Riverside Regional Medical Center as a Vascular Surgeon.

Plan to join us on March 18, 2009 at 7:30 p.m. in Room 117, Millington Hall, on the William and Mary campus. Refreshments will be provided by Beth Morgan.

March Field Trip

The field trip for March will be to Shirley Plantation on Saturday, March 21. Please meet at 8 a.m. with leader Tom McCary at the Colony Square Shopping Center on Jamestown Road. There will be a \$5 admission fee per person. Good birds expected to be seen include White-crowned Sparrows and Pintail Ducks.

Conservation and Management Project at Hampton Roads Bridge Tunnel South Island

Ruth Beck is requesting your help during the week of March 16–20, 2009 to assist with this long term conservation project. If interested please email Ruth Beck at rabeck@hughes.net or call at 757-870-0318.

Task: Carry out approved management and conservation action plans under the supervision of Ruth Beck, Professor Emeritus of Biology at W&M. Activities for the week will include preparation for the placement of coated fencing on site to prevent newly hatched young common terns, royal terns and black skimmer chicks from running into the road.

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Wild Birds Unlimited

Don't forget that the Williamsburg Bird Club receives a 5% rebate on the pre-tax amount for everything our members spend at Wild Birds Unlimited in Monticello Marketplace. Of course, you do have to let them know that you are a member. **We received \$230 this month from WBU based on sales to WBC members in the last half of 2008.**

Thank you, George & Val Copping.

February Bird Sightings

Report your backyard birds and local sightings to Fred Blystone at 229-4346 or fmb19481@verizon.net. If you encounter interesting birds on your vacation/travels, please share!

Jan 31: Bill Holcombe on a "duck walk" along the York River saw: at Felsgate, 1000–1,500 Ruddy Ducks, 3 Bufflehead pairs, 2 Hooded Merganser pairs, 6 Tundra Swans and another pair of Hooded Mergansers were across the road—at Indian Field, 2 Tundra Swans and a pair of Hooded Mergansers; at the French Memorial turnoff, 3 pairs of Buffleheads and 2 pairs of Hooded Mergansers; at Yorktown Beach, above the bridge 1 Common Loon, and below it 4 Common Loons, 2 Bufflehead and a Red-breasted Merganser. Found only 2 Canadian Geese at the Vineyard pond—On my back deck, a Hermit Thrush fed on a suet cake which I fastened to the deck rail after seeing it unsuccessfully try to feed at hanging suet.

Feb 2: Alex Minarik reports 6 Canvasbacks on the Greensprings West neighborhood pond, along with Canada Geese and Ring-necked Ducks

Feb 3: Lee Schuster reports that her Baltimore Oriole is still showing up.

Feb 3: Lois Leeth reports having the following in her yard; 15 European Starlings, 4 Red-bellied Woodpeckers, 2 juncos, 2 Blue Jays, 4 doves, 4 cardinals, 1 towhee, chickadees, Tufted Titmouse, White-throated Sparrows, and Carolina Wrens.

Feb 7: Martha Briggs called Shirley Devan to report that a friend of hers had a Dark-eyed Junco with a tick on its nose. She wondered if any other folks had observed this is juncos of other birds around their feeders or yard. Lois Leeth reports crows, grackles, White-breasted Nuthatch, Carolina Wren, Brown Thrasher, Redwinged Blackbirds, Eastern Towhee, cardinals, Mourning Doves and White-throated Sparrows at her feeders.

Feb 13: Bill Williams reports that late in the day (5:00–6:00 p.m.) from the College Creek pull-off nearest the bridge, five Great Blue Heron nests are being tended to/constructed by respective pairs and at least one bird was actively displaying. A Marsh Wren was fussing just at sunset.

Feb 12: Alex Minarik, Fred Blystone, Shirley Devan and Bill Williams go to the Great Dismal Swamp. It was a very windy day and that kept the species count down. We were able to gain access through the Railroad Ditch entrance and drove to Lake Drummond. A total of 47 species of birds were seen during the day.

Feb 15: Bill Williams reports that among 52 species seen at Greensprings Greenway Trail were one singing Barred Owl, 13 Tree Swallows, a very vocal and active Brown-headed Nuthatch, 73 Rusty Blackbirds, and 3 Pine Siskins.

Feb 17: Ruth Beck, Bill Williams, Alice & Seig Kopinitz, Sara Lewis, Felice Bond, Alex Minarik, Wes Lawrence and Shirley Devan do a bird survey at Craney Island. A total of 46 species were seen.

Feb 22: Bill Williams took this picture of two Snow Geese at Mainland Farm.



Feb 24: Hugh Beard stopped by Powhatan Secondary and reports that the Eurasian Wigeon is back.

Feb 24: Patty Riddick, Sheila Kerr-Jones, Susan Engle-Hill, Alex Minarik and Shirley Devan do a second bird survey at Craney Island. Highlights of the 34 species seen included Horned Grebes, Red-throated Loons, American Kestrel and Northern Harrier.

News from the Hampton Roads Bird Club

WBC member Margaret Ware joined leader Jane Frigo and other members of the HRBC for the February 1st walk in Newport News Part. Jane reported that the days as a whole was remarkably quiet—only 35 species were identified. Although ducks were in good numbers, many reliable species were missing—like Eastern Bluebird, Northern Mockingbird, Downy Woodpecker and even European Starlings.

The HRBC field trip for February was on the 14th, and the group visited Hoffer Creek Wildlife Preserve and Craney Island in Portsmouth. Although the pond at the Preserve was virtually devoid of waterfowl, Hoffer Creek itself was very productive with a Snowy Egret and a group of at least 6 female Common Mergansers as the highlights. Craney Island produced a Spotted Sandpiper, Dunlin, Western Sandpipers, Sanderling and a single Short-billed Dowitcher. There were 38 species seen at Hoffer Creek Wildlife Preserve and 45 at Craney Island.

On a crystal clear but cold and breezy morning, Jane Frigo led 7 other birders on the February 15th walk at Newport News Park. Ducks were in abundance. Some time was spent watching a pair of Redheads as they fed and preened among the American Wigeons and Ring-necks. Tundra

Swans were also present. A total of 45 species were seen during the walk.

Walks are conducted the 1st and 3rd Sundays year round in the park by the HRBC. Meet at the parking lot to the left of the Ranger Station around 7 a.m.

The speaker for the HRBC March 12 meeting will be Randy Thrasher who will present a program on *Birding the Southwest United States*. Meeting is at 7 p.m. at Sandy Bottom Nature Park, 1255 Big Bethel Road in Hampton.

The monthly field trip will be to Hog Island Wildlife Management Area on March 21. Meet at 8 a.m. in the parking lot of the Surry Nuclear Power Plant—**bring a picture ID**. All cars will be subject to a search.

The Hummingbird House

By Shirley Devan

Wild Birds Unlimited and owners George and Val Copping continue to be the area's unofficial clearing house for bird sightings. How do we know this? In early December, Mrs. Ninna Snead was in the store to stock up on bird seed when she mentioned to Val that she still had a hummingbird coming to her feeder. Soon after that, local bird expert Bill Williams was stocking up on bird seed at George and Val's store and learned from Val that a local resident was enjoying a hummingbird in December. Bill's rare bird antenna sprung up and the chase was on!



Photo by Shirley Devan

Bill Williams, Jeanette Navia, and I visited Ninna Snead December 27 at her "hummingbird house" near York River State Park. Ninna said the hummer had arrived November 22 and she had seen him every day since then. About 20 minutes after taking seats in her lovely breakfast room, the little hummer appeared at the feeder just the other side of the window—a perfect view. Binoculars were hardly needed. He appeared several more times, about 20

minutes between each visit. The hummingbird was not a Ruby-throat. But what was it?

Local and state records tell us that winter hummingbirds in Virginia are usually either Rufous or Allen's Hummingbirds. Both breed in the western US and winter in Mexico. Still, the question persists: what kind of hummer was at Ninna's house this winter?

Bill Williams advised us that the only way to confirm the species was to have the bird "in the hand" to examine the tips of the outer tail feathers. Otherwise, the most accurate label for this little hummer is *Selasphorus* hummingbird. Record keepers in Virginia try to ensure that all the rare winter hummers are identified and banded. The closest person licensed to trap and band hummingbirds is Bruce Peterjohn, Director of the USGS Bird Banding Lab at Patuxent Wildlife Research Center. Bill contacted Mr. Peterjohn and he arranged with Mrs. Snead to drive from his home in Maryland Sunday, January 4, to trap and band the bird and give a definitive ID.

Bill Williams, Fred Blystone, Brian Taber, my husband Steve, and I (most with cameras) showed up the morning January 4 to observe the trapping and banding. Mrs. Snead and her daughter and son-in-law were gracious hosts, providing coffee and donuts in her warm breakfast nook and a wonderful view of her backyard feeding station as well as the hummingbird feeder just the other side of the window pane.

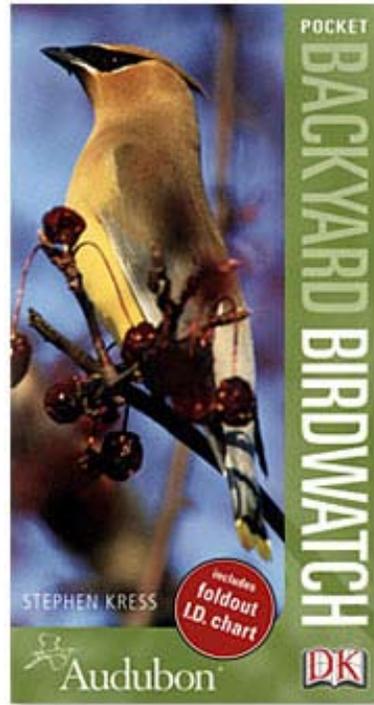
Anticipation was high. We chatted, enjoyed coffee and donuts, and patiently eyed the feeder. We waited ... and waited. After two hours, the little hummer still did not appear. Disappointment all around! Had the little hummer taken off just before the big day? Or was he spooked by the cage around the feeder? Mr. Peterjohn assured us that it was not the first time a hummer had failed to show up to receive his bling ...er ... bracelet ... er ... band. Usually the cage does not deter the hummer from coming to feed.

I've been in touch with Mrs. Snead since January 4 and visited a couple of times to see the little hummer and take some photos. As of February 23, the hummingbird is still visiting the feeder practically every day. Very soon the hormones will kick in and the little fellow will take off to find a girlfriend in the western US. We hope he finds his way!

Mrs. Snead will be glad for you to come by to see the little hummer, who is molting into brighter feathers as spring approaches. She requests that you call first to make sure she (and the hummer) will be at home—565-7719—and to get directions. Many thanks to Ninna for her willingness to share her little treasure with local birders.

Williamsburg Bird Club Book Review

By Jeanette Navia



Audubon Pocket Backyard Birdwatch. DK Publishing, 2008. ISBN: 9780756633455. \$9.95. pbk. 72 p. plus a fold out. Williamsburg Library call number 598.072 KRE.

Audubon Pocket Backyard Birdwatch is a slim volume in several ways. It's only 72 pages long, and it's narrow in width. Each subject is dealt with in one or two pages, and much of each page includes beautiful photos. The bird identification portion is a fold-out sheet

at the back of the book, with photos of thirty species commonly seen at feeders or in backyards nationwide.

This is a DK publication, so you know the photos are great. The information is provided by Audubon, so you know the information is good. It's brief, but good. After an introduction that discusses the importance of helping birds by creating backyard sanctuaries, there are three sections: *About Birds*, *Birds in the Backyard*, and *How to Identify*.

About Birds includes a very brief introduction to bird basics: courtship behavior, singing, staking out and defending territory, nesting and rearing, migration, and feeding. *Birds in the Backyard* is about habitats and feeders. Planting native plants and a keeping a "messy" yard (rather than a perfect lawn using poisonous chemical treatments) is emphasized, as is the importance of providing water for birds. Different feeders are described as are nesting boxes. Assembly instructions are included for a basic bird box.

In the section *How to Identify*, there are pages about what to look for in a bird's anatomy, its plumage and field marks. It's made clear that one needs to take into account the bird's usual range, the season, and its habits in order to make a correct identification.

The photos on the fold-out ID sheet include birds seen in the Western states as well as Eastern states. With limited

space, some common birds seen in this area of Virginia did not make the cut. There is a House Wren but no Carolina Wren, a Black-Capped Chickadee but no Carolina Chickadee. Casual birdwatchers in this part of the country might get these mixed up if they use this chart and no other guide. Many common backyard birds that aren't on the chart are shown throughout the book to illustrate points being made in the text, but are not organized in such a way as to make identification easy. This is a book to get one started in watching birds in one's own back yard, not primarily a guide to identifying birds. Perhaps this can be seen as a gateway book to more extensive field guides. It would make a good gift to a beginning birdwatcher.

Pelagic Birding Trip February 20

By Shirley Devan

Each winter the Virginia Society for Ornithology (VSO) sponsors a weekend Field Trip to the Outer Banks to observe wintering waterfowl and other avian species that winter on the coast. This year the organizers arranged for a pelagic birding trip Friday, February 20 with Brian Patteson and his 61-foot party fishing boat, the Stormy Petrel II.

Alex Minarik and I signed up for the Pelagic Trip and made plans to travel down Thursday afternoon to be in the area for the 6 am departure from Hatteras Village Friday morning.

Pelagic birding was a new adventure for me and I hoped to pick up a few life birds. Alex had gone out with Brian Patteson about 10 years ago on such a trip and provided valuable advice on what to expect—take Dramamine and saltine crackers! Done!

On our way to our hotel in Buxton, we stopped at Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge about 4:30 to check on the waterfowl and shore birds hanging about. Most of the waterfowl were in the South Pond but we carried our spotting scopes all the way down to the end of the path so we would have the sun behind us to get the best views of the birds in both ponds from the observation tower. We found the usual suspects, many of which we see on our local ponds, lakes, and rivers: both swans, Gadwall, American Wigeon, American Black Duck, Mallard, Northern Shoveler, Northern Pintail, Green-winged Teal, Hooded Merganser, Ruddy Duck, Double-crested Cormorants.

The wind and the sun were at our back as we leisurely headed back to the car. About half way I noticed something unusual along the edge of the tall grass on the nearest island in the North Pond. I found it with my binoculars and then with my scope. Could it be a bittern? "Alex, look at this bird!" An American Bittern had ambled

out of the marsh and was in plain view with the sun on his beautiful feathers. A life bird for me and a wondrous sight for both of us. We enjoyed good looks for about 10 minutes as he wandered along the edge. Finally the bittern disappeared and the sun sank below the horizon. A memorable sighting for both of us. The pelagic trip the next day would have to go a long way to top this!



Alex Minarik on the Stormy Petrel II Photo by Shirley Devan

Friday morning dawned clear, cold, and windy. The Stormy Petrel II with its crew of 3 and about 15 passengers headed east out of the Hatteras Inlet for Diamond Shoals north of Hatteras where Brian had spotted good birds earlier in the week. One of the crew was responsible for throwing dead fish over the stern to attract birds, more commonly known as "chumming". The other crew member was responsible for spotting the target species. He was communicating via walkie-talkie with Brian Patteson at the wheel. Of course everyone on deck was searching for pelagic species. The chumming brought in thousands of gulls and hundreds of Northern Gannets. The chumming is designed to bring in birds that in turn bring in birds—hopefully the ones we wanted to see. Late in the morning we got good looks at several Northern Fulmar, Dovekie and Razorbills. Most (not I) got looks at two Greater Shearwaters and a Manx Shearwater.

Another highlight was a Loggerhead Sea Turtle very close to the boat. Most saw many dolphins.

When on deck, only people's eyes and noses were visible because of the wind and cold. I had 5 layers on my torso and 3 layers on my legs, including full rain gear, which helped protect from the sea spray. The heated cabin provided respite from the cold and a warm spot to snack and

chat. Neither Alex nor I even came close to nauseous so the Dramamine worked.

We arrived back at the marina about 4:30. Good birding all around but Alex and I were glad to get a cup of hot coffee. The boat was still rocking when I went to bed Friday night.

Brian Patteson, a W&M biology grad, leads pelagic trips out of Hatteras all year. Check out his web site for schedule, prices, and some great photos: <http://www.patteson.com/>

A Merritt Island Experience

By Gary Carpenter

In late January Ann and I were in Florida and we stayed overnight in Titusville so we could spend a day birding on Merritt Island. While we did not see any “new” birds (for us) we did witness a very interesting occurrence. On an impoundment pond about midway along the Black Point Drive we saw thousands of water fowl. They were, of course, a mixed bunch that included Northern Shovelers, Blue-winged Teal, Pintails, and American Coots among others. We were outside of our van and were leisurely scanning the mass of birds looking for other species when, suddenly, the water of the pond was beaten to a froth as the birds all took off. Literally thousands of birds rose into the air with a flurry of wing-beats and they flew off in every direction of the compass. Except for the American Coots. They did not fly off, but instead quickly massed together into a tight “herd” on the far side of the pond.

I looked up and spotted a Bald Eagle making its way directly toward us from over the far side of the pond. It was the cause of the mass evacuation of all the other waterfowl and for the herding of the Coots. But the Eagle flew over the huge mass of Coots, who were now swimming rapidly back and forth in a very tight mass. The Eagle seemingly ignored them and, aided by a good stiff headwind, hovered over the open water...no birds visible beneath it. We assumed the Eagle was searching for fish. At this point the only birds in sight were the huge mass of Coots, still in a very agitated state on the far side of the pond, and the hovering Eagle. We put our field glasses on the Eagle expecting to see it dive toward the water and, possibly, come up with a fish. It made two or three lunges toward the pond's surface but always pulled up and continued its nearly stationary hovering activity. This went on for, we guess, a bit over a minute. Then the Eagle dipped once again toward the pond and, this time, hit the water talons first. It groped with its talons for a moment and then up it came....with an American Coot firmly in its grasp! We were quite surprised to see the Coot since we never

saw it under the Eagle and since its “buddies” were all in a herd together about 100 yards behind the Eagle.

So this unfortunate Coot became an Eagle's lunch and led Ann and me to wonder at their defensive behavior. Not one of the other species of water fowl was visible to us within moments of their taking off from the pond. Yet it seemed the Coots did not even make the attempt to fly off, instead they grouped together in a tight and very agitated “herd”. And why was the unfortunate Coot so seemingly unaware of the danger? Was it busy feeding under water and simply missed all the excitement? Did it know it had missed its opportunity to join the herd and then remained underwater in hopes of eluding the Eagle? And, finally, why did the Coots not take to the air to make their escape as did all the other water fowl? Interesting.

This was our second experience at birding Merritt Island National Wildlife Reserve. If you are unfamiliar with it, it is on the east coast of Florida right beside Cape Canaveral. It has an excellent Visitors' Center and some interesting trails. The nearby town of Titusville has plenty of accommodations. One precaution if you ever plan to bird there. Merritt Island NWR is closed 3 days prior to any scheduled launching at the Cape.

Virginia's Biodiversity and Its Conservation

The Historic Rivers Chapter, VA Master Naturalists will sponsor a talk on this topic on Wednesday, March 11, at 7 pm in the Multi-purpose Room, at the Human Services Building, 5249 Olde Towne Road, Williamsburg.

Admission is free but space is limited; please call/email Gary Driscoll at 566-4009 or adrienne-gary@erols.com to reserve your seat.

Virginia enjoys an extremely high biotic diversity and numerous conservation efforts are underway. This program will focus on biodiversity and its conservation with a strong Virginia emphasis.

Speaker Chris Ludwig has been with the Division of Natural Heritage within the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation since 1988. Since 1998, he has served as the Chief Biologist, directing a team of botanists, zoologists, and ecologists in their quest to identify all of the rare species populations and significant natural communities in Virginia. In 2001 he co-founded the Flora of Virginia Foundation, formed to produce the first modern manual to the vascular Flora of Virginia.

WBC January Walks & Field Trip

The temperature was right at freezing at 8 am when the group of 18 joined leader Susan Powell for the regular 2nd Saturday Bird Walk at New Quarter Park on February 14. The sun was shining, the wind was calm and everyone agreed it was a beautiful February morning to be out looking for birds. A total of 28 species were seen during the morning.



Photo by Shirley Devan

Seated: Jeanette Navia, Sara Lewis, Susan Powell, Angela Tambone, Betty Peterson, Cynthia Long
Standing: Alice Kopinitz, Gail Bono, Everett Bono, Paul Leger, Bob Long, Seig Kopinitz, Gary Hammer, Eileen O'Toole.
Missing from photo: Joanne Andrews, Sharon Falconer, Mike Powell, Margaret Ware

Eleven participants joined leader Hugh Beard for the February 21st field trip along the Colonial Parkway. There were a total of 54 species of birds seen at the various stops made along the parkway.



Photo by Shirley Devan

Left to right: Hugh Beard, Tom Armour, Joe Piotrowski, Cathy Millar, Seig Kopinitz, Alice Kopinitz, Betty Peterson, Chuck Rend, Tom McCary. Missing from picture is George Rountree.

Barbara Boyer, Joanne Andrews, Sandy Peterson, Margaret Ware, Paul Leger, and Bob & Cynthia Long joined leader Hugh Beard for the February 28th walk at New Quarter Park. At the beginning of the walk an immature eagle flew through the trees with a fish in its talons. He was being chased by an adult Bald Eagle. The woods were pretty quiet, almost like the birds knew a storm was brewing, so the songbird counts were down. A total of 36 species were seen during the morning. (There was no group photo taken during this walk).



Craig Eckenrode writes that he is lucky enough to have a Barred Owl in his backyard. The owl chooses different roosts, but always returns to the same tree. He sits there all day, facing the sun



Ninna Snead took this picture of the Selasphorus hummingbird that has been visiting her yard since November 22. (See article that starts on page 3)

CALENDAR

Saturday, Mar 7 & 14	Guided Tour of Fisherman's Island, contact dorie_stolley@fws.gov
Thursday, Mar 12	HRBC Monthly Meeting, Randy Thrasher, Speaker—See page 3.
Saturday, Mar 14	WBC Bird Walk, New Quarter Park, 8 am, Tom McCary, Leader
Sunday, Mar 15	HRBC Bird Walk, Newport News Park, 7 am, Jane Frigo, Leader
Wednesday, Mar 18	WBC Monthly Meeting, Joe Piotrowski, Speaker—See front page.
Saturday, Mar 21	WBC Field Trip to Shirley Plantation, Tom McCary, Leader—See front page.
Saturday, Mar 21	HRBC Field Trip to Hog Island—See page 3.
Saturday, Mar 28	WBC Bird Walk, New Quarter Park, 7 am, Bill Williams, Leader
Saturday, Apr 4	Walk & Talk, New Quarter Park, 10–Noon, Bill Williams, Topic: “Spring Migration”



March 18th: “Birding Down Under”, Joe Piotrowski, Speaker