



The Flyer

Newsletter of the Williamsburg Bird Club

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www.williamsburgbirdclub.org

Summer 2015

President's Corner

By Geoff Giles



Wow! New fledgling birds are everywhere and the annual flying circus in our backyards is on! The ranks of our summer resident birds are swollen by the first batches of fledglings and flight school for the newbies is in full swing. They can be seen flying in all directions, often in close pursuit of their

parents, who up until recently have delivered tasty meals to them in their snug nests. Now the name of the game is the serious business of surviving on their own, and learning to do what birds do – namely, do their best to eat but not be eaten! The young seem to tag along with their parents initially as best they can, still trying to mooch meals. The parents, on the other hand, seem intent on giving them a crash course on how to make it on their own as a bluebird, chickadee or woodpecker and then to cut them loose to fend for themselves.

Right out of their nests the young birds tire easily, sometimes perching to rest and get their bearings, but sometimes landing on the ground to recoup their energy. It is at that point that predation from outdoor and feral cats is particularly devastating. Even many adult birds are no match for a stealthy cat allowed to prowl. Other predators, including hawks and owls, must find prey to live and feed their own young, and young birds may be the easiest prey to catch in many situations. In spite of these dangers, plus heat, cold, wind, rain and other hazards, nature somehow generally provides adequate crops of young to ensure that most of our local populations continue to be around in sufficient numbers to allow us to look out this time of year and enjoy some scenes of new life in our yards.

In the last few days, a normally reclusive pair of towhees has been foraging in the open under my feeder. Today their fledgling appeared for the first time, perched atop my feeder station when his parents were nowhere to be seen. The adults do not come up on the feeder, but this young fellow seems to have noticed the steady stream of birds coming for seed and suet to my feeder. He perched uncertainly on the roof and peered down at the birds

grabbing seeds and suet, but did not seem to want to risk trying to land on the narrow side railing of the feeder. Unlike some of my other yard birds, his parents did not come up on the feeder to give him food. A fledgling bluebird, a Brown Thrasher and a Downy Woodpecker were fed on the feeder by their parents, but the young towhee is clearly going to have to figure out how to feed himself!

Our field trip to Piney Grove brought us close to Red-cockaded Woodpecker chicks being fed royally. A family group of as many as six to eight woodpeckers of this species come to the nesting cavity and stuff the gullets of the chicks. Happily for us, Mike Wilson of the Center for Conservation Biology led us through the Piney Grove preserve to a couple of active nesting cavities where we could watch a stream of red-cockaded woodpeckers bring bugs to their family's nestlings. By setting up scopes on the active cavities, we could even catch the occasional glimpse of the red cockade on the male for which this species is named. Mike gave us a crash course in the way the habitat must be managed by controlled burning of the understory to preserve livable habitat for Virginia's only surviving population (circa sixty) of this fascinating endangered habitat specialist. Mike also shared info on other interesting species in Piney Grove, including Bobwhite, Nightjars and warblers. Great trip!!

Our recent overnight trip to a Delaware beach in hopes of seeing Red Knots feeding on horseshoe crab eggs was enjoyable and paved the way for more trips of this type in the future. We found good accommodations in easy reach of the Audubon Nature Center at Slaughter Beach, reputed to be one of the top spots to see horseshoe crab breeding and knots. Due to foggy weather, we had better luck seeing horseshoe crabs but limited success with knots this trip. We had many shorebirds and horseshoe crabs at our feet, but the Red Knots stayed about 100 yards offshore on rock jetties and scarcely visible in the fog. The nature center made

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Wild Birds Unlimited

BIG NEWS....THEY'VE MOVED!

The WBC receives a 5% rebate on the pre-tax amount our Club members spend at Wild Birds Unlimited in Settler's Market.

Their new address is:

4625 Casey Boulevard, Suite 300.

Remember to let them know you are a member.

President's Corner (continued)

up for the scant views of the knots with films and displays showing the amazing migration of this species.

Undaunted by the fog, we went on to Prime Hook, another lovely nature preserve, where we saw more shorebirds, plus Blue Grosbeaks and a very visible Yellow-breasted Chat. This proved to be a manageable overnight trip, which will appeal for future trips.

We can't think about shorebirds without thinking about our club's founder, Dr. Ruth Beck. Ruth's passing left a legacy of important conservation work in progress, much of it directed towards preservation of scarce breeding habitat for some of our most cherished shorebirds. As was her way, Ruth involved other committed conservationists, who had worked at her side and are continuing her important work. Ruth mentioned to me often that she had spent years engaged in the conservation of Red-cockaded Woodpeckers at Piney Grove and kept a warm spot on her heart for those birds. Indeed Ruth contributed greatly of her talents and efforts for numerous birds and birders. We miss having Ruth with us, but will keep her spirit and work active. Our club will continue to give grants in Ruth's name to deserving ornithology students at William & Mary, to continue the passion for study and conservation of birds that Ruth embodied.

I hope you will have some relaxing time in nature in the summer ahead, and that your family activities and travel will include some time to enjoy some birding. As of now, we have not scheduled any trips this summer but we'll let you know promptly if anything comes along that is too good to miss. In the meantime, we hope you will enjoy a healthy and relaxing summer, and we will see you when the fall migrants begin to move through!

A Summary of the May 3, 2015 Williamsburg Bird Club's Annual Spring Bird Count By Bill Williams

What a grand and GLORIOUS day May 3, 2015 was for being out "counting crows" and every other avian species seen and heard. With almost no wind, temperatures in the low 50s to low 70s, conditions could not have been much better for this, the club's 38th annual Spring Bird Count (SBC). After all the checklists were posted, 76 participants, a new record exceeding 67 in 2014, had reported 150 species, 3 less than the long term 153 mean. Capping the final tally were 8 "write-in" species (species so seldom recorded locally in spring they are not on the count's regular reporting list) and new all-time SBC peak totals for 12 species.

Topping the rarities list AND setting an all-time local high count for any season was a group of 7 Anhingas that passed over Jamestown.

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Spring Bird Count (continued)

These birds go in the books as our 11th local record over all and our second SBC record; one was near Lafayette High School on the April 29, 2007 count. Those who had been birding along the James and York Rivers prior to count day knew going in this had been a banner year for Royal Terns. So it was no surprise when the final tally showed a grand total of 320, shredding the previous record of 256 set on April 29, 2011.

Among the record high counts established on last year's May 4 SBC were 49 Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, 59 Downy Woodpeckers, 289 Tufted Titmouses and 111 Summer Tanagers. Thanks in part to the increased number of participants this year, each of those totals was eclipsed. The hummer high now hovers at 54. If we are going to undo the new peak counts for the others, we will have to exceed 64 Downys, 308 Tufteds and 114 SUTAs! No problem, right?

We doff our logo-motif caps to the 60 Red-headed Woodpeckers that were tallied, one better than the previous high of 59 set April 26, 2009. This year's 29 Yellow-throated Vireos erased one of our longer standing SBC peak counts of 20 from May 2, 1982. The April 26, 2009 Blue-gray Gnatcatcher record of 205 was made obsolete by this count's 238. Nineteen Veerys, 12 of them found by the College Woods team, pushed the former high of 14 recorded on two previous SBCs (May 15, 1983 and May 11, 1997) under the permanent oblivion brush pile. How "sweet, sweet, sweet" it was to enter 29 Prothonotary Warblers ahead of the 26 on record for the April 29, 2012 SBC. The count's Yellow-throated Warbler total (124) was a 38% increase over the 90 listed during the May 1, 2011 SBC, and the Chipping Sparrow peak count now stands at 206, three more than the 203 found April 29, 2012. The Hog Island folks found a Northern Shoveler (our 4th SBC record) and 2 Buffleheads seen near Indian Field Creek were the 6th SBC record.



Photo by Judy Jones

This spring folks at the College Creek Hawkwatch had been seeing American White Pelicans soaring over Hog Island off and on from mid-March into April. So it was certainly a terrific SBC bonus for the count team there to spot 2, our first SBC encounter since 22 were observed on April 29, 2012 and the 6th time this species has made the SBC spread sheet since one was at Hog Island May 2, 1982.

Not typically thought of as a late spring migrants, American Pipits and Pine Siskins gave our final compilation a nice boost this year. The Skimino team discovered 7 pipits, one shy of the peak count of 8 on May 8, 1994, and our 7th SBC record. The 5 siskins reported were part of a state-wide late spring influx of this species, most likely birds returning from further south where food resources helped them survive the bitter winter. We've had this irruptive finch on 11 previous SBCs, most notably 71 on May 4, 1986.

During the bird club's May 6, 1978 inaugural SBC five White-crowned Sparrows were found. Up to 2015 the species had made only 4 other SBC rosters, none of which outdid that tally of 5. So this is a rare bird, not just for spring but for any season. This year two widely separated count section teams claimed one each. A beautifully documented individual was found by our first-ever Gloucester County team.

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Spring Bird Count (continued)

Now wait a frog-mouth minute....Gloucester County?!!!! How can that be?!!! This is the Williamsburg Spring Count. We're not in Gloucester!

Okay now. Rein in your meal-worms! Here's the deal. When the 15-mile diameter count circle was drawn in 1977 for the club's Christmas Bird Count application to the National Audubon Society, its center was set at the Colonial Williamsburg Information Center for two reasons. One was that the parking lot there was where all of our field trips started, and two, that pin-point was just perfect for the arc to incorporate bird-rich Hog Island in Surry County **AND** Indian Field Creek on the York River, where spring and summer a "colony" of Boat-tailed Grackles nested. With that placement (pretty slick, huh?) the arc also swept a narrow portion of Gloucester County, a section that for 37 previous years has not even been scouted out, much less birded. Well, thanks to Bill Blair and his comrades, we believe we now have that covered. With their White-crowned Sparrow and this count's only Horned Grebe, an SBC 4th occurrence, having a crew across the river really paid off.

But it was the happenstance of the second White-crowned Sparrow that will put a smile on your beak. Lois and Mitchell Byrd like to take Sunday breakfast at Victoria's in the Williamsburg Crossing Shopping Center. Count Day, while the two were dining, a bird thumped into one of the restaurant's windows. Mitchell saw the victim, which by now you've deduced was a White-crowned Sparrow, retrieved by an employee. The bird appeared DOA. However, it soon revived in Mitchell's hands, probably recovering from just having the wind knocked out of it, and was gently released by the good doctor (PhD-type)! You'll have to figure the odds on that one....a count day rarity, in a suburban shopping center, captured alive after striking a window at an eating establishment while an ornithologist is there to hold it in his hands!!! Sounds like mega-millions lottery odds. By the way, that was Mitchell Byrd's first hand-held White-crowned Sparrow!

As much as we want to highlight rare and exciting birds and those species with high counts, we also must acknowledge those we failed to find that were once routine. That list includes ZERO Northern Bobwhite and ZERO rails. This makes 3 consecutive SBCs with no quail and was the first time EVER no rail species of any kind were detected!

With that the 38th Williamsburg Bird Count goes into the permanent record. Sincere thanks to all who devoted some or all of their day to our birds. Very warm thanks to the team leaders who worked so hard before during and after count day to round up participants, gather their team's data and saw to it rarities were documented.

And a Spring Bird Count Post-script

There were some in the room who knew of her. There were some in the room who knew her. There others in the room who had known and worked closely with her for the better part of 5 decades. For just about everyone there, it was the last time we saw her. Ruth Beck was the embodiment of the Gift that kept on Giving. Her dear friend, the late Bill Sheehan's words of tribute were never so apt, timely and well-deserved. "Good on you, Ruth. Good on you."

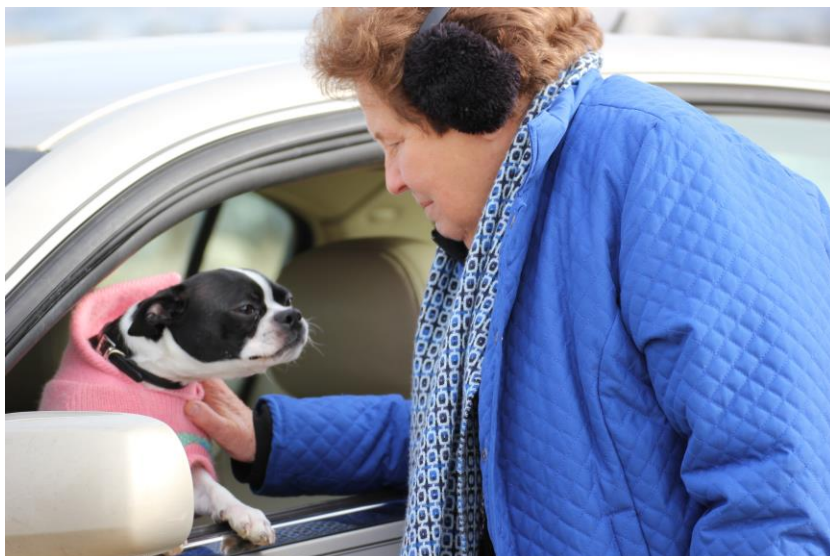


Photo by Cathy Millar

Reported Bird Sightings for Summer, 2015

We want to know what you're seeing in your yard and travels. Please share with Club members by sending your sightings to Judy Jones, jjones184@cox.net or Shirley Devansederan52@cox.net.

Members reported these sightings in May and June:

May 1: While Virginia and George Boyles were visiting their daughter in Mississippi, they were greeted by a Eurasian Collared-Dove under the feeder, and there were five Red-headed Woodpeckers in their daughter's yard at the same time that day. Having driven to Magotha Road on the Eastern Shore to see the doves, they were delighted to see hers come each morning.

May 2: Lois Leeth reported seeing 20 Roseate Spoonbills, 4 Great Egrets, 1 Juvenile Brandt (female hit by a car), 2 Canada Geese, 10 White Ibis, 6 Double Crested Cormorants, 4 Mallards, 1 American Swallow-kite, and dozens of nesting water birds in the Alligator Farm pond in St. Augustine, Florida.

May 8: While birding on the road running under power lines and down to the pumping station in Colonial Heritage, Ann and Gary Carpenter saw: Blue-Gray Gnatcatcher, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Eastern Wood Peewee, Eastern Phoebe, Scarlet Tanager, Summer Tanager, Indigo Bunting, Red-tailed Hawk, Blue Grosbeak, Great-crested Flycatcher, Yellow-throated Vireo, Great Blue Heron, Acadian Flycatcher. They heard: Field Sparrow, Common Yellow-throat, Grasshopper Sparrow, and Yellow-throated Warbler.

May 10: Bill Williams reported seeing nine American White Pelicans on Hog Island.

May 6 & 13: Lynda Sharrett saw a Mute Swan in the pond off Quarterpath Road (between 199 & Rt. 60). It was alone and hung out there for a week. One of those days it was accompanied by a Great Blue Heron and a Canada Goose as well. We usually don't see birds on that pond.

May 14: Bill Williams saw eleven American White Pelican soaring over the James River near Kingsmill. They were observed off and on for more than thirty minutes. The large predominantly white pelicans had large orange bills, black primaries and black trailing edges on the secondaries.

May 14: Trevor Sleight, Erin Chapman, and Matt Anthony photographed a Bicknell's Thrush in Matoaka Woods at William & Mary. Later that afternoon, they found the same bird in an unsuccessful attempt to get an audio recording.

Despite the lack of audio, the identification was confirmed based on the overall small size, more reddish-brown color than expected for Gray-cheeked, very extensive bright yellow on the base of the bill, and very short primary extension, all of which are illustrated in Trevor's photo. Furthermore, when the Bicknell's tape was played, the bird became extremely agitated and immediately flew over to where the team was standing.



May 15 and 16: Bill Williams continued to spot American White Pelicans. A flock of 11 drifted northward from Hog Island over the James River near Kingsmill and then returned to Hog Island.

May 21: Geoff Giles reported seeing three Grasshopper Sparrows at the Warhill Sports Complex at James City.

May 22: Ann and Gary Carpenter birded on the meadows on either side of the old Massey House in front of Colonial Heritage. Their big find was a large flock of Bobolinks in the meadow between the magnolia tree drive and the entrance drive into CH....estimate is between 30 and 40 birds. They also saw Grasshopper Sparrows, Eastern Meadowlarks, Barn Swallows, Purple Martins, and a Brown Thrasher. Another nice find was a Green Heron in the pond at the end of Gun Lock Road where it T's into Rexford. They also saw the "usual suspects"--Robins, Mockingbirds, Starlings, Grackles, Crows, Turkey Vultures, and Mourning Doves as well as a House Sparrow at a feeder on Gun Lock.

May 23: Bill Williams sighted one Nelson's Sparrow singing at College Creek. The bird was singing in/near black needle rush clusters. This species is a rare but regular late spring migrant in York River drainage marshes. Its song was heard at least six times, with a very soft inflection as the song ended, not broken/crackly like a Saltmarsh song.

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Reported Bird Sightings for Summer, 2015 (Cont'd)

May 26: Bill Williams reported a Chuck-will's-widow at the junction of Longhill Road and Cranston's Mill Pond Road.

May 29: Virginia and George Boyles were at the end of Poquoson Avenue "birding by car" with Barbara and Richard Hudgins where a pair of Willets were guarding three young chicks in the marsh grass near the road. A



Green Heron flew over as they left. Also they saw Least Terns, Osprey, GBH, Great Egret, Snowy Egret, and



assorted gulls at Messick Point. The Barn Swallows have again nested under the pier there. The week before, there had been two Black Skimmers on the sandbar, and four

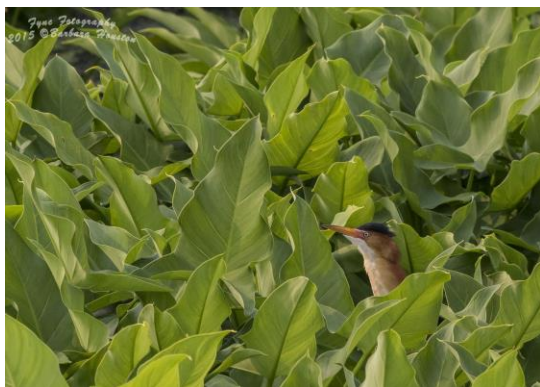
Dowitchers with the peeps and Dunlin in the marsh area.

June 6: Dan Cristol reported seeing a White-throated Sparrow still attending a feeder on the Rolling Woods neighborhood in Williamsburg. This may be one of the latest in the state.

June 8: Andy Hawkins reported seeing a White-throated Sparrow on Beecham Drive in Yorktown.

June 9: Dorothy Geyer was working with the herps scientists in Yorktown when she heard the Chuck-will's-widow loudly call in the large field on the west tour road.

June 10: In the late afternoon Barbara Houston sighted a Least Bittern at Dutch Gap hidden in the leaves by the first platform.



New Quarter Bird Walk on May 9, 2015

Jim Corliss, Geoff Giles, Beatrix Woods, Sara Lewis, Sue Mutell, Bob and Cynthia Long, Joanne Andrews, Cathy Bond, and Betty Peterson all met at New Quarter Park for the May 9th bird walk. They were able to identify 41 species. The happy birders are pictured below....



New Quarter Bird Walk on May 23, 2015



Early on a late May morning, 12 birders joined Bill Williams as he led the New Quarter Park bird walk. Joining him were Joanne Andrews, Catherine Bond, Geoff Giles, Molly Sweetnam Burland, Cheryl Jacobson, Joyce Lowry, Tom McCary, Sue Mutell, Mona Overturf, Beatrix Woods, John Sweetnam (from Portland, Oregon, visiting his daughter Molly), and one participant who asked not to be identified. These intrepid bird lovers identified 47 species.

TAKE NOTE!

Pay Your 2015 Dues!

We still need your dues for 2015!

Individual: \$15 Family: \$25

Patron: \$35 Student: \$5

Make your check payable to WBC and mail to:

PO Box 1085, Williamsburg, VA 23187.

Please consider adding something extra to your check to support our Bill Williams Nature Camp Scholarships, our Ruth Beck and Bill Sheehan Ornithology Research Grants to Biology Graduate Students, and feeder stations at the Child Development Resources campus. Membership dues alone do not support these projects. We can't do it without you!!

A MESSAGE FROM JEANETTE NAVIA AND WRL

Jeanette Navia writes, "Williamsburg Regional Library users can access digital magazines free through Zinio, and I learned today that the library has added Birdwatching to the list of magazines. A person has to have a WRL library card to create an account. Instructions are at <http://www.wrl.org/find-it-online/emagazines>. After creating and then logging into their account on the Zinio website, users choose what magazines they want to subscribe to. They can read the magazines online or they can read them on their mobile devices using an app available from the link above.

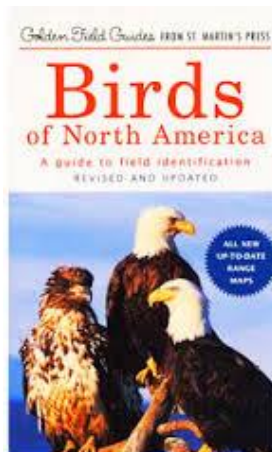
BOOK BAGS NOW AVAILABLE



Birds of North America.

Labeled and bagged, these titles are now available to use with groups of students. Sibley's is appropriate for students grades 4 and up.....the Golden Book is appropriate for younger students who are ready to bird! You can check these out by emailing Judy Jones at jjones184@cox.net or calling at 757-229-2667.

Great News! At the last board meeting, money was set aside for the purchase of 10 copies of Sibley's Field Guide to Birds as well as ten copies of Golden Books



WARBLER ROAD by Andy Hawkins

Every now and then, certain conditions occur and Jupiter aligns with Mars or the moon is at apogee or perigee or something else happens to make things perfect. I wish I knew what they were and could predict them. One thing I am starting to learn, is the last week in April to the first two weeks in May, can be magic in the southern Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia if you are a birder.

For the past two years Geoff Giles and I have spent 2 days during the first week of May in an area known as Warbler Road. It starts at the Acadia exit off interstate 81, exit #168 route 614. It is a series of Forest Service roads, unpaved, that wind to the Blue Ridge Parkway at Sunset Field Overlook. The roads are 614 to FR59 to FR768 to RT 812. It is about 13 miles, but the beauty is you start at the James River at an elevation of 850 ft. and ascend to the Parkway at an elevation of 3474 feet. The trees are pretty much leafed out at the James but near the top it is still late winter or very early spring with little or no leaves. Birds can be located according to elevation with Baltimore and Orchard Orioles, vireos, chats, swallows, Blue Grosbeaks, cuckoos, and flycatchers near Acadia. As you work your way up the mountain and elevation increases, the types of birds change. Down low, Water Thrushes can be seen and heard near the streams along with Black-throated Green Warblers and Northern Parulas. Farther up on FR 812, Cerulean, Kentucky and Black-throated Blue Warblers, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks and Scarlet Tanagers can be found. On top, one can see a variety of thrushes, Canada, Chestnut-sided and Kentucky Warblers, Scarlet Tanagers and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks. Geoff spotted our first Blackburnian Warbler on the Parkway. Ravens were abundant with an owl or hawk of some kind thrown in every now and then and Ovenbirds, Red-eyed Vireos and Redstarts everywhere. If you start from Sunset Field Overlook on the Parkway, Rt.812 is at the north end of the parking lot and goes to the left. To the right is a 1.7 mile road called Radar Rd. that winds along between the ridge and the Parkway. This should not be overlooked and there is room to turn around. I believe the earlier you go, the farther down the mountains the bare trees will come and if you wait until later in May, the top might be leafed in. For Geoff and me, we have decided we will try for the first week in May next year. Even if Jupiter is not aligned with Mars, it should be magic!

MEMORIES OF RUTH BECK...

CATHY MILLAR WRITES: I attended her funeral. It was so delightful that, as we stood at her graveside, one could hear quiet murmurs of ‘hear the cedar waxwings?’, etc. I believe Ruth would have been pleased that as we mourned, we could not help but to also keep track of what birds were present. The birds have lost a tremendously effective advocate.



Photo by Lee Adams

DAN CRISTOL WRITES: The birds have lost a great friend. It is spring and life is in the air. Bluebirds are fledging their first broods and wildly attacking any squirrel or snake that comes close, Brown Thrashers are frantically gathering insects from the driveway for their newly hatched chicks, and twittering hordes of Barn Swallows are scrambling to gather mud for their nests in every puddle. Sadly, though, Ruth Beck, Emeritus Professor of Biology at William & Mary, passed away suddenly at 72.

Ruth helped birds at many levels, starting with the superb bird feeders at the lakeside home which she shared with husband Sherwin. Her feeder spread was so alluring it drew in species rarely fond of birdseed, especially Rose-breasted Grosbeaks and Indigo Buntings. Ruth worked right up to the time of her death documenting and managing the nesting success of our dwindling colonial waterbirds, most notably the Least Terns of Craney Island and the huge tern and gull colony dependent on the rocks of the Hampton Roads bridge-tunnel.

These human-created habitats have become important refuges for birds being displaced from our Barrier Islands as rising sea level slowly drown out their natural nesting colonies. The owners of these properties have reason to resent the descending hordes of waterbirds, which create transportation hazards and require workers to accommodate in all sorts of ways. But for decades Ruth has been able to graciously negotiate fair treatment for the birds, and to enlist an army of dedicated volunteers and students to manage their habitats. I have worked alongside retired school teachers, conscripted college students and members of a prison work detail to ensure that the picky Black Skimmers had the proper surface of weed-free, flat sand for their nests.

Ruth, who started at William & Mary in 1969, developed, taught and supervised biology laboratories for tens of thousands of college students. These were the first intensive lab experiences for freshmen, and were often formative. She inspired countless undergraduates to go on to take courses in ornithology and to pursue birds as a hobby or profession. Ruth also hired scores of students to assist in her summer research with tern and gull nesting colonies, and turned many apathetic field hands into aspiring scientists. To the end she carried out weekly surveys of Craney Island, one of Tidewater’s most exciting birding destinations, with a crew of volunteer local birders. Like a reporter who gets to every crime scene first, Ruth’s group broke the story on many local rarities, including last year’s Snowy Owl, and many, many more.

Besides inspiring countless future scientists, birders and conservationists, and spearheading important local research and land management projects, Ruth was also a stalwart contributor to what is known as citizen science, the enlisting of non-professionals to gather data for scientific research. For more than forty years Ruth and a crew of birders has been monitoring the bird populations of Williamsburg as part of the Audubon Christmas Bird Count. Never satisfied to stick to her own territory, I would often catch Ruth sneaking on to my adjacent territory to make sure that I was counting things accurately. I forgave her readily, because I never missed a chance to sneak on to campus to count the Rusty Blackbird flock, just in case Ruth had missed a few.

Ruth may be best remembered locally as one of the founders, longtime presidents, and benefactors of the Williamsburg Bird Club. My current fondness for the bird club is directly the result of Ruth having engaged me in various roles soon after I arrived on campus. At a time when I should have been focused solely on my duties at the College, I developed a lasting relationship with this thriving civic group. Under Ruth's direction, the club has for decades raised money to provide research grants to William & Mary graduate and undergraduate students undertaking bird research, as well as providing scholarships for kids to attend Nature Camp, purchasing books for the library, and sustaining educated interest in birds. The Williamsburg Bird Club, through Ruth's continuous generosity of spirit, has become one of the best examples of a sustained town-gown interaction that I know of anywhere. With generosity, humor and intelligence, Ruth Beck left the world a better place than she found it, and inspired many others to do the same. When generosity, humor and intelligence were not enough, she would turn to the most potent of her charms, extravagant spreads of food, always including strawberries. And like the Rose-breasted Grosbeaks and Indigo Buntings, people were drawn to Ruth Beck's strawberries. Those wishing to remember Ruth can send contributions to the [Williamsburg Bird Club](#) (mention the Ruth Beck Fund), P.O. Box 1085, Williamsburg, VA, 23187. Ruth, we miss you already.

INGE CURTIS WRITES: I happened to sit next to Ruth Beck when she gave a presentation on Prothonotary Warblers to the Bird Club of Williamsburg. She had a sample bird box with her and I was most interested to learn more about making the property I had just bought more bird friendly. I was a complete novice—all I knew was that I absolutely loved birds, even if I did not know their names. Ruth never held that against me but made me aware of what I heard and saw. She included me on the Spring and Christmas Bird Counts and had me at her home, where her birdsong clock confused me no end.



Royal Terns Photo by Inge Curtis

It was also such a privilege to accompany her to the Hampton Road Bridge Tunnel, to Craney Island and to Grandview Beach to photographically document bird populations there. The last day Ruth spent in the field was May 5th. I am so very grateful I could share that last day with her and her beloved sea birds.

One time when we were sitting on my porch on the Chickahominy River, she mentioned innumerable birds that she heard: vireos, Prothonotary Warblers, Common Yellowthroats, bluebirds, Pine Warblers, tanagers, Yellow Warblers and a host of others I did not know existed, let alone lived in my yard. She was right, of course--in time I have SEEN all of those and many more. And often I was able to photograph them. I would share these images with her and she in turn would share them with friends and family. It was such a joy to have several people come to me at Ruth's funeral to thank me for those pictures. It had given them great joy, too.

MARILYN ADAIR WRITES: A few weeks ago I was invited to ride along with Ruth's Craney Island survey team. On our lunch break, I congratulated her on her new grandson and asked if she had pictures. She responded that she didn't want to be the boring grandparent foisting her photos on others, but since I asked...She took out her phone and beamed as she showed me her precious Aiden. Sadly, that will be my last fond memory of the wonderful person who was Ruth Beck.

LEE SCHUSTER WRITES: Ruth was the kindest, most thoughtful person and even though we didn't see each other or talk on a regular basis, we always picked up where we left off. She was a great listener as well. She was the first person we really met in the bird club when we moved here 24 years ago. When my daughter was born, Ruth always asked how she was doing and always wanted the picture we sent at Christmas for her refrigerator. When Ruth was in rehab about 7 years ago, we came to visit her. Ruth engaged Jenny in conversation and they began to discuss a series of books my daughter was reading about feral cats. Ruth was very interested and asked my daughter if she could read some of them because of her interest in feral cats and birds. My daughter thought that was the greatest thing that Ruth was interested.

Ruth and I had a lot of fun together involving various bird club projects. The first that comes to mind was when the club sponsored a bird feeder cleaning with Wild Birds Unlimited behind their store on Richmond Road. We had more feeders come in than expected, which was good, but that meant lots of parts too. We were laughing so much when we tried to make sure all the parts went to the right feeder. The other fond memory was when the two of us were surveying two golf courses for Dan Cristol's study on the effects of golf courses on birds. We did Stonehouse Golf Course and another one near Brickshire. Ruth and I were not golfers and it was pretty obvious. Ruth drove the golf cart and the number of times we either got lost or almost ran into something was quite humorous. We were laughing so hard during the whole experience, I am surprised we saw any birds. Both of these times were so much fun and Ruth and I were laughing about these times just before she passed away.

Ruth was a special person who taught me so much. I will miss her daily. She leaves a void that cannot be filled.



Photo by Shirley Devan

VIRGINIA BOYLES WRITES: Ruth Ann Beck was an amazing woman. Have you heard that phrase before? It was spoken often as people remembered her at her funeral. As I've thought about the astounding times we've had with her, I'm ever so grateful that my hand went up before she finished speaking when she asked at a bird club meeting for volunteers for her 3 projects. I'd gone to Craney on a field trip with her shortly after we joined, and knew there weren't many other places where one would see an Upland Sandpiper. Craney had its hazards, however. The roads had large crevasses along the edges, and anything was likely to show up as you drove along. Once, while watching for birds in the cell, she ran over a group of 4 wires projecting from the roadway. It sounded like the bottom of the car had come off. Startled, she quickly called on the radio for me to watch whatever was in the road. The wires were truly hard to see before you hit them, and they couldn't be pulled out. The next week, she hit them again, and we began to warn of "Ruth's wires" each time we started down that division road. After about a month, someone placed a large piece of wood in the roadway so you could see them better, but didn't remove them. Some Craney worker must have run over them, too. After about 6 weeks, they finally disappeared. There was always something lying in the road, since they used the dirt pumped from the dredging to raise and smooth the roads.



"Ruth's Wire" Photo by Virginia Boyles

She only had a flat tire once while we were with her. Dave had just begun to go with us, and he and a couple of Craney workers at the office helped get her tire changed so she could continue the count. She was always “working the problem”. She often warned people who drove with her to be careful on the roads there. However, the rewards of being with her exceeded any risk of driving the roads with windows down and mosquitoes looking for lunch.

MARILYN AND JOHN ADAIR WRITE: We love watching this video as it shows us a young, healthy Ruth Beck and her cat, shown in segments of the film. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gkWuLoHdF2s>

BRIAN TABER WRITES: I've known Ruth for about 40 years, but during the past 7 years, after my retirement, I was lucky to be on her bird research team, seeing her almost weekly as we surveyed Grandview Beach in Hampton, Craney Island in Portsmouth, and the Hampton Roads Bridge-Tunnel. We posted signs for nesting areas and counted birds. Ruth was ever positive about the birds and always concerned about those of us on her team, asking how we were doing and how our families were doing...she was genuinely interested and caring to a degree that was amazing. She was also the Vice-president of Coastal Virginia Wildlife Observatory, where I have been on the Board since it began. Her thoughtful insights into how the organization should operate were invaluable. The birds and their families are lucky to have had her in their lives...and I am, too.

JERRY UHLMAN WRITES: “I’ve written a birding column that has appeared in the Richmond Times-Dispatch for over a decade, and when you asked for memories of Ruth Beck, I was reminded of a story I wrote back in 2001 about a field trip with her. She was incredibly generous with her time and patient with my many questions. I’ve attached my old story for you to have a look at. I was particularly struck by Ruth’s devotion and commitment, which I tried to convey in this piece. I’m looking forward to reading the tribute you’re working on. Thanks. Jerry”

*Richmond Times-Dispatch,
Richmond, Virginia*

Flyways and Bynways—July 21, 2001

Our small boat bobs in the shallow waters off the southern shore of Plum Tree Island National Wildlife Refuge near Poquoson and Ruth Beck, ornithologist with the College of William and Mary’s Biology Department, carefully scans the sandy beach for nesting piping plovers. I’m with Beck on a hot June day as she visits waterbird colonies to monitor the number of birds, nests, eggs, and chicks. Plum Tree Island is off limits to the public because of its history as a bombing range over the years which left unexploded ordinances scattered throughout the large salt marsh, so colonial nesting birds have this island sanctuary pretty much to themselves.

Beck has been monitoring the health of waterbird colonies along the beaches and barrier islands of Virginia for twenty-five years. She has a cadre of students and graduates, some who’ve become prominent field ornithologists in their own right, which patrols over seventy miles of beaches during nesting season to count gulls, terns, skimmers, plovers and oystercatchers. The annual June counts tell her whether species are thriving, holding their own or declining.



Snowy Egret photo by Inge Curtis

Marine and wading birds such as cormorants, herons, egrets, ibises, gulls, terns, and skimmers share a common trait of typically nesting in large groups or colonies. These colonial nesting birds are often concentrated in small and exposed areas and are vulnerable many factors such as human disturbance, severe weather, attack by predators, and urban sprawl, all which destroy their habitat or reduce the number of birds in a colony.

Of the trends that Beck has witnessed over the years, it's clear that the number of gull-billed terns has decreased sharply in Virginia. Also, the growing number of black-backed and herring gulls has resulted in increased predation on nesting chicks up and down the Atlantic coast. But, on the whole, the number of colonial birds in Virginia has remained remarkably stable, according to Beck.

On this hot and humid early June morning, there are no nesting plovers on the thin strip of Plum Tree Island's sandy beach. But, the number ospreys we spot is amazing. Their recovery in Virginia is obvious by the number of occupied nests along the channel markers and the dozen birds that perch in the stunted trees of Plum Tree Island.

Our boat swings southwest across the Back River to Grandview Natural Preserve, a popular recreation destination in the City of Hampton. At Northend Point, accessible only by boat, you'll find the largest colony of least terns in Virginia. Over two hundred pairs use this remote site for nesting, and Beck has posted signs around the colony to keep intruders at bay.

As our boat inches toward shore, a few curious visitors stand around the carcass of a beached whale well away from the least tern colony, but still under the fretful eyes of willets and terns. As we walk toward the nesting area the parents become increasingly alarmed, and Beck carefully leads us around the edge of the nesting ground.

The nests of least terns are mere scrapes in the white sand, faint hollows made by foot scratches and wingbeats. Most nests have two or three sandy-colored eggs, and a few have newly hatched chicks—only a couple of inches long—covered with light gray down. As we pass the colony, parents call to the chicks and they obediently remain motionless. The scant grasses sprinkled around the colony provide neither camouflage nor shade for the eggs and chicks, and it's easy to see how vulnerable these nestlings are to predators.

Survivors will be about as big as a robin and have a wingspan of twenty inches. They'll stay with their parents until fall migration when they head to Central and South America in the late fall. Least terns are an endangered species whose numbers appear to be increasing. These smallest of North American terns were collected in the 1800s for ornaments on ladies' hats, but their sharp decline in the past was caused mainly by habitat loss and human disturbance.

Another family of terns, common terns, nest nearby on the Hampton Roads Bridge-Tunnel maintenance islands. They're joined by black skimmers and the two species scrape shallow nests in the grass-covered sandy soil and raise chicks side-by-side. While the bridge maintenance areas are not open to the public, Beck and her students are frequent visitors to monitor the breeding success from year to year. Because of Beck's vigilance, Department of Transportation staff now accepts the birds' presence and assists in the monitoring process. A camera has been installed so that her students can watch and record the activities of both species, especially the nocturnal black skimmers.



Black Skimmers photo by Inge Curtis

As we drive onto the artificial island, it's clear that the terns and skimmers find the area hospitable. Nests dot thin strips of grass-covered soil amid bumper-to-bumper traffic and asphalt. DOT staff works around the maintenance buildings and sometimes their movements bring loud reproaches from the terns, which spring from their nests into the air. They tolerate humans but are particularly testy during the height of their nesting season.

It's a harrowing experience walking from our car to the building that houses huge fans that ventilate the tunnel, as well as Beck's computer screens and recording equipment. Nesting birds rise and race straight toward us, swooping and diving, and hovering over nests until we pass. Inevitably, we are pecked on the top of the head several times amid flapping wings and screams of protest.

We climb to the rooftop to get a panoramic view of the nesting ground on this tiny island. In front, skimmers and terns are crowded together on nests that dot the foot-high grass. To the right, a large flock of skimmers stand together facing the wind and Beck explains that these birds are most likely non-breeding males or mates taking a break from nesting duties.

We crouch low on the roof to keep a low profile. Despite our best efforts, the wary birds spot our slightest movement and rise in unison. The many eggs in both tern and skimmer nests attest to a bumper crop of new chicks. Yet, lurking not far away, biding their time at the edge of the colony, we spot several laughing and herring gulls quietly waiting... Our retreat from this busy nesting colony to our car brings, once again, loud protests, diving and head-pecks.

Heading home after a day with Ruth Beck as she tended her colonies, I felt optimistic and reassured. Here is a person who started with warblers and songbirds and moved on to colonial waterbirds, where she's found her own niche. Training highly-motivated students, monitoring the birdlife of Virginia's barrier island beaches, guiding research of our nesting colonial waterbirds for twenty-five years—"I'm the luckiest person in the world!" Beck exclaimed.

We are the lucky ones, birders who enjoy Virginia birdlife whether it's on the Eastern Shore or our own backyards. In Beck, we have a dedicated sentinel at work, ever watchful over our environment, constantly taking the pulse of the Commonwealth's birding habitat. By monitoring the rise and fall of species and recognizing danger signals, Beck can marshal the support and resources needed to affect change. She's typical of a handful of university teachers and researchers around the state whose ornithological work is important to our enjoyment of birds at home and on the road. They are unsung heroes who should have more recognition for their work and deserve our gratitude.



Black-necked Stilts

Photo by Inge Curtis

Members of the Williamsburg Bird Club have written tributes to Ruth and shared memories of their dear friend. To read them on-line, please go to www.williamsburgbirdclub.org.