



# The Flyer

## Newsletter of the Williamsburg Bird Club

Vol. 48 No. 3

[www.williamsburgbirdclub.org](http://www.williamsburgbirdclub.org)

March 2024



### PRESIDENT'S CORNER

By Nancy Barnhart

Greetings all! It seems that spring is right around the corner, but we still have to wait and see what March will bring. Lion? Lamb? Madness? March has it all! We are off to a great start in 2024 with successful bird walks and field trips. Thank you, Scott Hemler and Rexanne Bruno. We have had outstanding January and February presentations from Dixie Sommers and Dr. Bryan Watts. Mary Ellen's beautiful newsletters have helped to brighten the winter months. We have a hard-working Board and some unsung heroes. Please take a look at the list of Board members in this newsletter and take a moment to thank them when you see them.

Great job to all of you who participated in the Great Backyard Bird Count! There were over 7800 species reported worldwide. Birders recorded 98 species in James City County, 101 in York County, 58 in Williamsburg, and 54 at Hog Island WMA in Surry County. I heard from many of you who submitted lists from your homes and local hotspots, some for the first time. The enormous amount of data reported to eBird is vital for avian conservation both locally and across the globe. According to eBird, data have "been used in hundreds of conservation decisions and peer-reviewed papers, thousands of student projects, and help to inform bird research worldwide." Your contributions are important and valuable.

If you're being inundated with blackbirds and grackles and other large flocks of birds at your feeders you might be getting tired of refilling them several times a day. Large groups of birds are efficient at finding food and can make fast work of bird seed and suet. Flocking birds are also better at avoiding predators. Safety in numbers! So, we can appreciate why they do what they do at this time of year. We can rest assured it won't be too long before they take off and pair up to start another year of breeding. It's all part of March.

(Continued on Page 2)

### UPCOMING PROGRAMS

By Patty Maloney

**March 20, 7:00 p.m. (in-person at the Quarterpath Recreation Center and via Zoom): Dan Cristol, "How Does the Superfund Law Protect Birds?"**

Join us on Wednesday, March 20, at 7:00 p.m. at the Quarterpath Recreation Center (Room 2, 202 Quarterpath Road, Williamsburg) or via Zoom. Our presenter will be Dan Cristol, Chancellor Professor of Biology at William & Mary, on "How Does the Superfund Law Protect Birds?" Most people know what a Superfund site is, but few know why toxic waste sites are called that and which unique law makes Superfund sites different from other places where bird habitat has been degraded. Dan Cristol will talk about his work on songbirds at a half-dozen different Superfund sites around the country and why they present such an interesting opportunity to make more birds.

**Save the Date:** April 17, 7:00 p.m., presentations by W&M students awarded Bill Sheehan/Ruth Beck Ornithology Research Grants by the WBC. 🐦



*Detail from a montage of bird nests found at a Superfund site in New Jersey. Courtesy of Dan Cristol.*

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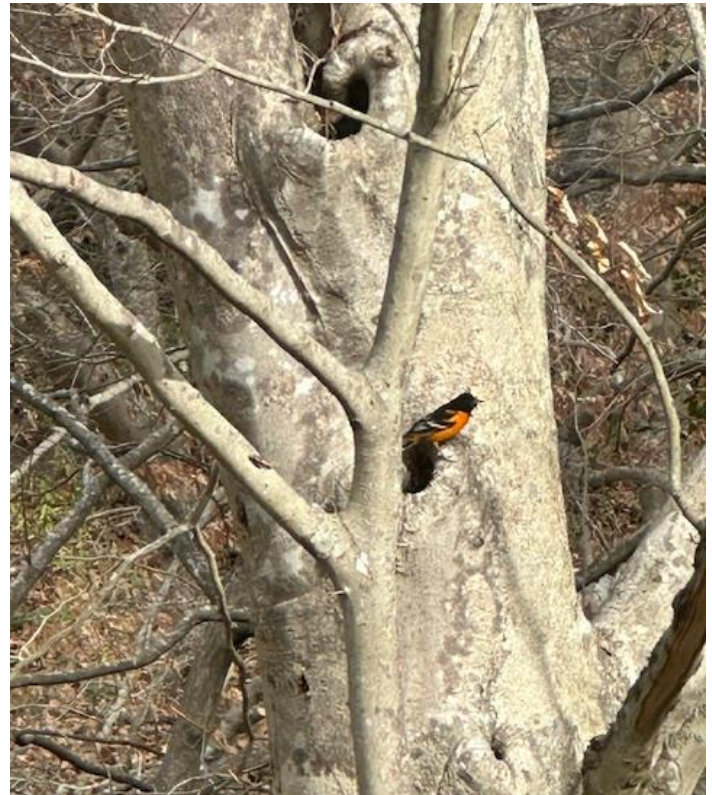
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**PRESIDENT'S CORNER, Continued from Page 1**

Charles Dickens said this about March: "It was one of those March days when the sun shines hot and the wind blows cold: when it is summer in the light and winter in the shade." Seems very true!

Stay warm and happy birding! 🐦



*While participating in the Great Backyard Bird Count this year, Scott Hemler captured this photo of a Baltimore Oriole which has been visiting the feeders at his home in Rolling Woods off and on all winter.*

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**WBC MEMBERSHIP**

Please extend a warm welcome to our newest members: Craig Marshall, Thomas Charlock, Karen Mattern, Barbara Kowinsky, Conrad Schwab, Mary Beth Hennessy, and Marc Thibault.

If you still need to renew your membership for 2024, you can do so online at <https://williamsburgbirdclub.org/renew/> either using PayPal or by printing a membership form from that page which you can then mail in with a check. The form can also be printed from Page 9 of this newsletter. We encourage you to choose to receive our newsletter only by email when you pay your dues. This will allow our club to direct more of our income to programs and projects and less to printing and mailing. 🐦



Our February 24 bird walk at New Quarter Park drew both familiar and new faces. Photo by Scott Hemler.

## **BIRD WALKS: NEXT MONTHLY WALK on MARCH 24**

By Scott Hemler

We had 21 people come out on February 24 for our club's monthly "Fourth Saturday" bird walk at New Quarter Park. It was a cool but beautiful morning to go birding! We saw 28 species of birds (see [eBird checklist](#)). We saw many of our usual birds such as Tufted Titmouse, Downy Woodpecker, House Finch, and American Robin. We also saw three Bald Eagles, two immatures and one adult. No Ospreys were seen. We did see a Bonaparte's Gull down at the dock as

well as several Great Blue Herons. The herons are starting to nest in a pine tree near the marina. Spring will soon be here!

Our next walk at New Quarter Park will be on Saturday, March 23. Meet me in the parking lot by the park office at 8:00 a.m. 🐦

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## **RAPTORS: A FISTFUL of DAGGERS**

PBS promotional literature calls this two-part documentary series, presented by the television program *Nature*, "an extensively researched and exquisitely filmed story of raptors. The episodes feature not only brilliant cinematography but also fascinating insights into the lives of eagles, hawks, and falcons, as well as lesser-known hunters such as the secretary bird, the crested caracara, kites, and more." The first part of the series airs at 8:00 p.m. Wednesday, April 10, on WHRO-TV. 🐦

## **THE VIRGINIA BIRDING CLASSIC**

The Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources invites everyone to participate in the kickoff of its inaugural statewide birding competition, the Virginia Birding Classic! The Classic will run from April 15, 2024, through May 15, 2024, during which time teams of birders are asked to search the public lands of Virginia for as many species as they can find in 24 hours.

All registration proceeds will benefit the Virginia Wildlife Grant Program which connects youth to the outdoors. Registration opens on March 1, 2024 and closes April 1, 2024. Learn more at this link: <https://dwr.virginia.gov/virginia-birding-classic>. 🐦

## FIELD TRIPS: MACHICOMOCO STATE PARK ON MARCH 16

By George Martin

### Saturday, February 17 – Colonial Parkway

On Saturday, February 17, nine birders braved the stiff winds along the York River to bird stops along the Colonial Parkway. Rexanne Bruno led the group, with Nancy Barnhart recording sightings on eBird. And the waterfowl mostly appeared. The group got good looks at a flock of Bonaparte's Gulls at Indian Field Creek. Common Loons and Horned Grebes were fairly close to shore at the Yorktown waterfront. Decent flocks of Savannah Sparrows and Chipping Sparrows entertained the group at the Moore House. A Bald Eagle, one of several seen, flushed a flock of American Black Ducks at Felgates Creek. In all, the group identified 41 species. The five eBird checklists from the day can be accessed by clicking on the following links: [Felgates Creek](#), [Indian Field Creek](#), [Redoubts 9 & 10](#), [Moore House](#), and [Yorktown Beach](#).

### Saturday, March 16 – Machicomoco State Park

Let's hope the weather is better for the March field trip to Machicomoco State Park in Gloucester County. The field trip is scheduled for Saturday, March 16. Deborah Humphries will lead us at the park, where we usually see Field Sparrows, Eastern Meadowlarks, and possibly a Palm Warbler. We'll meet at the parking lot just inside the pay station at 8:00 a.m. I won't be arranging car pools for this trip. For Google Maps, the park address is 3601 Timberneck Farm Road, Hayes, VA 23072. If you have an annual pass to Virginia State Parks, please bring it. Otherwise, a day pass is \$5 per vehicle. 🐦



*Birding the York River from the Colonial Parkway on the February 17 field trip. From left: Bill Weldon, Liz George, Bill Williams, Rexanne Bruno, George Martin, Deborah Humphries, Nancy Barnhart, and Babs Giffin. Photo by Shirley Devan.*

## EAGLES of the CHESAPEAKE

Summary by Cathy Millar

No one knows more about Bald Eagles than Dr. Bryan Watts, and the WBC was privileged to hear his presentation on “*Eagles of the Chesapeake*” at our February 21 meeting. Dr. Watts is both Director of the Center for Conservation Biology and Mitchell A. Byrd Research Professor of Conservation Biology at William & Mary. He noted the importance of bird clubs as he’d started studying birds as a youngster in West Virginia where he was mentored by the local bird club. He reported that the Center for Conservation Biology (CCB) has studied many bird species from Argentina to the high Arctic but there are about 100 species to which the CCB has had a multi-decade commitment. One of these is the Bald Eagle in the Chesapeake Bay area, which the CCB has monitored for over 60 years. The Chesapeake Bay is one of the world’s largest and most unique estuaries. It has a shoreline of about 11,800 miles and average depth of about 20 feet. That shallow water allows light to penetrate to the bottom creating a highly productive habitat attractive to many forms of life and a convergence area for breeding, migrating, and wintering birds.

Bald Eagles depend on large bodies of water and are the only species of the genus of sea eagles in North America, with none found in Central and South America. They are large birds: the females weigh typically 10 -12 lbs. and the males 8-10 lbs. They build huge automobile-size nests starting with a platform of large dead limbs in the broad crowns of big trees near water. The availability of large trees was a limiting factor in the 1960-70’s due to Virginia having been largely cleared of trees needed for wood by armies during the Civil War. Now, more secondary tree growth has become large enough to host nesting eagles. In December and January, eagles collect soft material, like grass, to line the nest and create a raised cup to hold 1-3 eggs. Incubation time is about 36 days. The hatchlings can’t maintain their own temperature until over 15 days old. At eight weeks old, they reach full size and their legs become strong enough to hold them upright. The next four weeks in the nest allows for neural development and coordination, resulting in first efforts to fly. Dr. Watts described the change in plumage from year to year until they sport the white hood and clear yellow bill and eye iris at age 5, which marks the beginning of their breeding age. There’s a steep learning curve to become proficient at hunting and protecting their breeding territory, and the older, more experienced eagles are the most effective parents. The female typically stays at the nest to care for the chicks while the male does most of the hunting.

Fish comprise 94% of the brood’s diet. Bald Eagles also like aquatic turtles, especially the stinkpot (eastern musk turtle) that can’t completely close its shell. They eat a variety of different mammals, but the preferred one is the muskrat. They also catch waterfowl and gulls.



*Carol Annis saw, and photographed, a lot of Bald Eagle activity at her neighborhood pond in Toano in February. She watched this young eagle catch a fish and then sit still in the water for so long she started to worry, but the bird eventually flew off with the fish.*

The DDT era of the 1960’s saw Bald Eagles plummet to 60-80 pairs in the entire Chesapeake Bay area and 20-30 pairs in Virginia’s part of the bay. There were none on the James River for five years until a breeding pair arrived in 1979. Most of this data was collected via aerial surveys starting in 1962. These Virginia surveys were the first aerial surveys in North America. In 1977, Dr. Mitchell Byrd took over that survey, and Dr. Watts joined him in 1991. They flew 150 hours each spring (first to map where the active nests were, and later to count the number of chicks), with Dr. Byrd flying until he was 91. They documented that the Bald Eagle recovery began around 1980 when fledglings exceeded adult mortality. By the mid-1980’s, barely 20 years after the DDT era, the eagle population had nearly reached pre-DDT numbers. From then, the population grew by 8-12% per year, and in 2007 Bald Eagles were removed from the endangered species list. In the late 1990’s–early 2000’s, it was noted that the eagles had no problem cohabitating with humans with the fastest growing population now in residential areas. Today, Bald Eagles have far exceeded the recovery goal with more than 3,000 breeding pairs in the entire bay area.

*(Continued on Page 6)*

## BALD EAGLES, Continued from Page 5

The CCB's current focus of study is why the Bald Eagle population has been declining since its peak in 2000. They've found that while there are 3,000 breeding pairs (6,000 individuals), there is actually an estimated total of 40,000 eagles in the Bay area if the number of subadults and "floaters" (birds of breeding age without space to breed) are included in the count. There are not enough suitable nesting sites to accommodate the floaters and they are harassing the breeders. Prior to the late 1990's, a breeding male spent 36% of his time guarding the nest during the first four weeks of the hatchlings' lives but now spends 70%, leaving much less time to hunt. Dr. Watts pointed out that brood size reflects the availability of food. If food is plentiful, the chicks are evenly fed. Otherwise, a dominance hierarchy forms, with the alpha chick getting most of the food to insure that at least one survives. Due to the male not being able to provide enough food, the average brood size has dropped from two to one. This will eventually bring the population into balance with the available nesting

sites. Also, some of the floater birds from the Bay are successfully starting to colonize further afield in the Mid-Atlantic to North Carolina, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and western Virginia. The food supply limits the density of Bald Eagles in those areas, but the birds are managing.

Currently, there is great concern about new contaminants, especially pharmaceuticals such as the hormones that humans take. These can't be filtered out by our sewage plants and end up in the rivers and bay, potentially affecting Bald Eagle reproduction. Lead poisoning from ingesting ammunition remnants in deer carcasses is a leading cause of mortality of adult birds. Despite the successful return of Bald Eagles, we need to remain vigilant.

There is not enough space in this newsletter to share all the fascinating insights into the lives of Bald Eagles that Dr. Watts shared. I urge you to watch the full presentation via YouTube: <https://youtu.be/f3a9cNuptoY>. 🐦

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## A CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT JOURNEY with THREE AMERICAN OYSTERCATCHERS

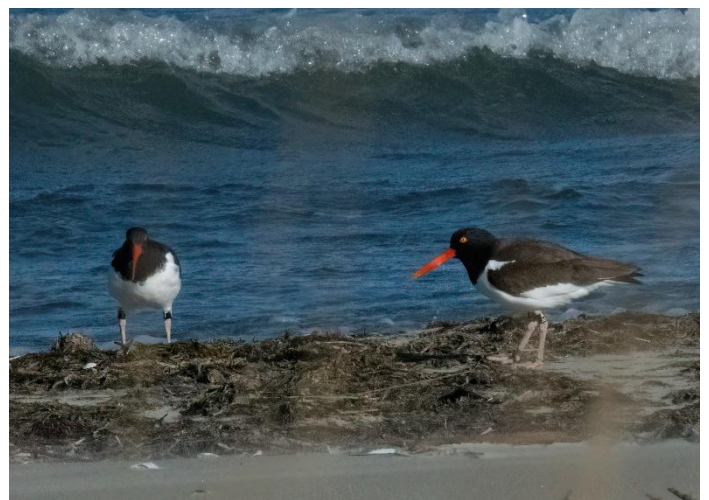
By Bill Williams

When one hears a distinctive, high-pitched "queep, queep, queep, deedeede dddrrr" call while birding on a Virginia barrier island, there's a high probability an American Oystercatcher (AMOY) is nearby. Such was the case during the December 30, 2023 Cape Charles Christmas Bird Count. Three very vocal AMOYs were encountered on Fishermans Island, the southern terminus of Virginia's Eastern Shore peninsula, during that challenging, blustery, and cold count day. The venerable Cape Charles count, begun in 1964, has shown that AMOYs wintering on Fishermans Island are not unexpected. What made this encounter exciting though was that each of these strikingly-colored shorebirds sported black leg bands with white lettering. What were their stories? Searching the American Oystercatcher Working Group website's (<https://amoywg.org>) Banding and Resighting portal for reporting banded individuals revealed an intriguing history for these birds, including the fact that each of them had coastal Virginia natal origins and that each had a strong affinity for Fishermans Island.

AMOY "EX", the oldest of the trio, had been banded as a nestling on Fishermans Island June 11, 2009. Subsequently, it had been resighted 32 times, all but one of those sightings in lower Northampton County, Virginia. The lone outside-Virginia detection had been

on Folly Island, near Charleston, South Carolina on September 1, 2011.

AMOY "A over AC" had been resighted 31 times since it was banded as a nestling on Fishermans Island June 21, 2013. This bird seems to be a homebody in that all of the resights had been in lower Northampton County. (*Continued on Page 7*)



*Banded American Oystercatchers photographed by Bill Williams on Fishermans Island on the 2023 Cape Charles Christmas Bird Count.*

## BANDED OYSTERCATCHERS, Cont. from Page 6

Unlike its companion beach-mates this day, AMOY “TT”’s natal site was Shanks Island in the upper Chesapeake Bay portion of Accomack County. Banded as a nestling August 10, 2010, it has exhibited quite a wanderlust. Among its 38 resights were late fall to early spring sojourns near Wilmington, North Carolina from 2011-2013 with an interim visit to Fishermans Island in June 2012. All subsequent resights of “TT” from 2013 to the present have been in or near lower Northampton County.

Documenting specifically marked birds during a Christmas Bird Count adds another twist of purpose for this annually-occurring and internationally-significant citizen science event. The advantage of having resources to explore at least one aspect of an individual bird’s life history—in this case, where three shorebirds found on a single island on the same late December day have lived their lives—personalizes our ornithology experiences. The birds are more than parts of a cumulative total. They have stories we just discovered a little bit more about. 🐦

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## STUDENT RESEARCH GRANTS AWARDED

By Ann Carpenter, WBC Treasurer

I recently sent funds to William & Mary for this year’s Ruth Beck/Bill Sheehan Ornithology Research Grants. The awards (\$599 each) are going to the following students:

- Samuel Arnold, “Waterbird Use of Living Shorelines across the Gradient of Urbanization;”
- Sophie Rabinowicz, “The Movement of Mercury from Aquatic Ecosystems to Terrestrial Songbirds;” and
- Maxwell Rollfinke, “The Lateral Extent of Mercury Contamination in Songbirds and their Prey.”

We will look forward to hearing the students present the findings of their research at our club’s April 2025 meeting! 🐦

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## RECENT SIGHTINGS



*Les Lawrence shared these delightful photos of a **Yellow-rumped Warbler** (left) and **Carolina Wren** (right) recently taken by his bird cam. Said Les, “I use the Bird Photo Booth (BPH) 2.0 bird cam. I know other WBC members and Master Naturalists use more elaborate systems, but the BPH is inexpensive and easy to use. My biggest problem is sometimes getting too many multiple shots that require a lot of processing time. I live in York County, virtually surrounded by woods, and I have many bird visitors, averaging about 30 - 35 species each month and 65 species a year. But I’m still waiting for a shot of that really rare visitor.”*

## MORE RECENT SIGHTINGS



**Deborah Humphries** provided the following report: “Nancy Barnhart, Bill Williams, Brian Taber and I went out to Jamestown Island on the morning of February 23 to follow up on a ‘kingbird’ reported via iNaturalist two days earlier. It was drizzly and chilly and not a great day for a flycatcher, but our group did finally locate a **Western Kingbird** in the same general area it had been reported. It was hanging out with an Eastern Bluebird, watching it hunt, and occasionally it tried to pick off the food the bluebird was efficiently retrieving from the ground. The kingbird did also find bugs in the air or on the ground, but not many. It’s really exciting to have a rare bird like this in our backyard! A lifer and a county bird for me!” The kingbird was still being seen at Jamestown by WBC members as of February 29.



**Cindy Sherwood** said she was “experimenting” with a new camera on February 25 at New Quarter Park when she captured a great photo of a female **Belted Kingfisher**. We look forward to seeing more of Cindy’s experiments!



On February 11, **Nancy Barnhart** joined the many other birders who recently faced the challenge of hiking, as another birder put it, “about 1000 feet of elevation gain over 2.5 miles to reach the summit” in the Mt. Pleasant Special Management Area in Amherst County to see the first **Gray-crowned Rosy-finch** reported in Virginia. This [Western species](#), which “nests in the highest parts of the highest mountains in North America,” was first sighted on February 8 and continued in the area through the 19<sup>th</sup>.



**Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers** are only winter residents in our area, so it’s a treat to see one. **Dan Earnhardt** was able to add the species to his life list when a male sapsucker visited the feeders at his residence in The Meadows on February 19. Dan’s photo shows the yellow belly of the bird quite well.





# 2024 Williamsburg Bird Club Membership Form

Name		
Address		
City	State	Zip
Email	Phone	

Your email will be used for WBC's email mailing list. You will receive announcements of upcoming bird walks, field trips, meetings, other events, and the full color email edition of the newsletter through this mailing list.

\_\_\_\_\_ Do you also want a b&w paper newsletter sent to your physical address?

**Membership**      \_\_\_\_\_ New\*      \_\_\_\_\_ Renewing

\_\_\_\_\_ Individual    \$20

\_\_\_\_\_ Family        \$25

\_\_\_\_\_ Patron        \$35

\_\_\_\_\_ Student      \$5

\*How did you hear about the Bird Club?

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### I wish to make a contribution to:

\$ \_\_\_\_\_ the Ruth Beck & Bill Sheehan Ornithological Research Grants Fund for W&M Students

\$ \_\_\_\_\_ the Bill Williams Nature Camp Scholarship Fund

\$ \_\_\_\_\_ the Child Development Resources Seed/Feeder Fund

\$ \_\_\_\_\_ the Bird Club Conservation Fund

### Make your check payable to the Williamsburg Bird Club and mail to:

Williamsburg Bird Club  
P.O. Box 1085  
Williamsburg, VA 23187

Your membership dues and additional contributions are important to the mission of the Williamsburg Bird Club. Thank you!

If you have questions about your membership, contact Membership Chair Jeanette Navia, [jnavia@gmail.com](mailto:jnavia@gmail.com)

**The Williamsburg Bird Club is exempt from federal income tax under 26 U.S.C. Section 501(c)(3) and is a non-profit organization eligible to receive tax deductible donations. A financial statement is available on request from the VA Office of Charitable and Regulatory Programs**



**Williamsburg Bird Club**  
**PO Box 1085**  
**Williamsburg, VA 23187**

## **ANNUAL DONATIONS FROM OUR LOCALLY-OWNED BIRD STORES**

The Williamsburg Bird Club wishes to express our gratitude to our locally-owned Bird Stores, Wild Birds Unlimited and Backyard Birder Seed & Supply, for their generous donations each year to the Club. Their contributions help sustain WBC's annual commitment to provide funds for the Ornithology Research Grants given annually to graduate students at the College of William and Mary as well as support other Club projects and activities.

### **PLEASE CONTINUE TO SUPPORT OUR LOCALLY-OWNED BIRD STORES & FELLOW WBC MEMBERS**

Backyard Birder



**Backyard Birder Seed & Supply** (located in Williamsburg at the Quarterpath Shopping Center near the Kingsmill Harris Teeter) supports the WBC through donations and a 5% discount on purchases for WBC members. For your discount in-store, please inform them you are a WBC member during checkout. <https://www.backyardbirder.org/>



**Wild Birds Unlimited** (located in Williamsburg at Settler's Market in New Town) supports the WBC by donating to the club an amount equal to 5% of the pre-tax amount spent in the store by WBC members each year. Please inform them you are a WBC member during checkout. <https://williamsburg.wbu.com/>