

Williamsburg Bird Club

Wednesday, March 16, 2016

Integrated Science Center, Room 1127, W&M, 7:00 pm

Attendance: 42

President's Remarks:

- Shirley Devan, past president, opened the meeting and welcomed the gathering. Shirley is filling in for President Geoff Giles who is in Europe.
- Shirley thanked Dan Cristol for reserving the room for us and setting up the technology.
- Shirley welcomed 2 visitors.
- Shirley reported a request from the Refreshment Committee that volunteers are needed to provide refreshments for the April 20th and May 18th meetings. A sign-up sheet was passed around and given to Ruth Gordon. Ruth added that refreshments can be as simple as water and cookies and for folks to feel free to team up.

Programs: Cheryl Jacobson, VP Programs, reported on upcoming programs for WBC meetings.

- **April 20:** The three W&M grad students who received grants from our club last year will give 15 minute presentations on their research. She asked that in addition to supporting these students with our money that we also give them our time and come to hear their presentations. Their professor, Dan Cristol, attested to the presentations being especially good this year. One student is doing pioneering work on the use of beams of sound to keep birds from slamming into windows and wind turbines. The other two will speak on the effect of mercury pollution on birds which is now in the late stage of the study. One student is looking at whether it affects the female's preference for 2 different males if one is contaminated with mercury. The other student is studying whether mercury contamination affects hearing. It has already been proven that it affects bird song. Noting that meetings in the past featuring student presentations has had the lowest attendance, he also urged us to attend.
- **May 18:** Bob Schamerhorn will return with a new program featuring warbler identification with photos and song. This will be especially useful as it comes just before our field trip to Highland County which will feature warblers.

Program: Cheryl Jacobson introduced tonight's speaker, Ashley Peele PhD, Coordinator of Virginia's Second Breeding Bird Atlas. She received her BA in Zoology in 2000 at Ohio Wesleyan University and completed her PhD in 2015 in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at Tulane University.

The VABBA2 will depend heavily on citizen science. She described citizen science as undergoing a modern resurgence. A major benefit is that it allows people to engage with and take responsibility for their local ecosystems. She gave Henry David Thoreau as an early example of a citizen scientist. His observations were continued by others to the present which has yielded a dataset spanning 160 years and providing researchers valuable information for detecting trends, etc. Previous studies have shown that the bird population in the US is declining in all major habitats except for wetlands and that is due to

duck hunters organizing and making a concerted effort at waterfowl preservation. This proves the importance of harnessing public interest and effort. She said that people only care when they understand something and can engage in it. The VABBA2 offers this opportunity.

The history of atlasing started in the UK in the 1950's as initially documenting plant distribution but shortly afterwards was used for the study of birds. By the 1970's, atlasing started in the US.

A Breeding Bird Atlas entails documenting a complete inventory of all breeding bird species and distribution across a given geographic area. The key difference between atlasing and other studies like the Christmas Bird Count is that evidence of breeding behavior is also documented. The first BBA in VA was done between 1985 and 1989. 196 species were confirmed. Atlasing is normally done every 15-20 years. It has been 30 years since the last one was done in VA.

The objectives of the VABBA2 are: (1) Build a scientific rigorous dataset on the current distribution and breeding status of the birds in VA. (2) Collect abundance data. (3) Assess changes over the last 30 years since the last BBA. (4) Increase public interest and awareness through active engagement.

She discussed the different roles of volunteers. The state of Virginia is divided into 12 atlas regions (we are #11). Each region has at least 1 volunteer Regional Coordinator who recruits, tracks block sign-up and provides local guidance. Dave Youker (present at the meeting) is the coordinator for our region.

The role of the main body of volunteers is to: (1) go birding (2) survey atlas blocks (3) document evidence of breeding (4) report findings to VABBA eBird data base.

She stated what volunteers needed to know: (1) An ability to identify species in their area (Those feeling insecure about their birding skills should consider teaming up with other birders. There are plans to launch a mentoring program by next year if the need is identified.) (2) Knowledge of how to use eBird or willingness to learn (3) Record keeping skills (4) Willingness to talk to people about the Atlas.

She discussed the field methods for gathering data. The state is laid out in a grid system based on USGS Topographic Quad Maps. Each block represents about 9 square miles. Virginia has 4,412 blocks. In each grid, there are 6 blocks with each block having a 2-letter directional label (ex. SE, SC, SW). Of these, every SE block is a priority block. There are a total of 750 priority blocks and volunteers are encouraged to sign-up for these blocks in their selected region first before moving on to other blocks. The goal of the 1st VABB2 field season of 2016 is to survey as many of these priority blocks as possible. (It was interesting to note that Williamsburg is not in a priority block.)

Dr. Peele laid out basic guidelines for interested volunteers as follows: (1) Sign-up on the VABB2 website for one or a few blocks. Each block can be covered by one to four people (no more than that) with only 1 person identified as the principal atlaser. (2) Acquire necessary materials (block maps, etc.) as noted in the handbook. (3) Visit your block and become acquainted with habitat types, roads and land ownership. Contact owners for access to private land. (4) Build a species list. By late May most breeding species are around. (5) Collect breeding evidence.

There are 4 categories for noting bird sightings: Observed, Possible, Probable and Confirmed. There are 24 breeding codes in total within these 4 categories. Example of *observed* is F for a flyover. Example of *possible* is S for a singing male. Example of *probable* is P for a pair of birds in a suitable habitat. Example of *confirmed* is FL for fledged young or NB for nest building.

A priority list of species that are declining, rare or not enough info known (ex. Swainson Warbler, Cerulean Warbler, Loggerhead Shrike, Bobolink, Common Nighthawk) will be of special interest for observation.

At least 2 nocturnal surveys will be expected.

Volunteers are asked to estimate how many of a species are seen but paid crews will be doing abundance counts.

Breeding season of most species is June and July and is when volunteers are expected to spend most of their time in the field. A bare minimum of 20 hours is expected but no doubt will entail many more hours.

The official launch of the VABBA2 will be at the VSO meeting April 29-May1. We were encouraged to 'like' the official FB page at www.facebook.com/VABBA2.

Field Trips: Jim Corliss, Field Trip Coordinator, was out of town and Shirley Devan reported on the following upcoming trips:

- **Saturday, April 16:** Great Dismal Swamp led by Bob Ake featuring birds and butterflies.
- **Sunday, May 15:** Local Spring Bird Count coordinated by Jim Corliss. This count follows the same protocol as the Christmas Bird count. Feeder watchers are encouraged.
- **Saturday, May 21:** Highland County led by Matt Anthony. There will probably be a limit set to reduce the number of vehicles. May also be an overnight trip. Further info will be upcoming.

Announcements:

- A gently used sportsman vest with lots of pockets suitable for birding and camera equipment was donated by Cathy Millar.
- Shirley Devan enquired about recent sightings of returning spring birds and nesting activity. Members reported chickadees and bluebirds having laid eggs already. A Yellow-throated Warbler and female Baltimore Oriole were reported. Blue-winged Teals are on Lake Matoaka. Shirley reported that a second Western Tanager has been seen in James City County during the last month.

At the end of the meeting, a free raffle featuring fresh eggs from member Andy Hawkins's hens and a lovely bird jigsaw puzzle was held.

Shirley adjourned the meeting at 8:07 pm.

Refreshments were provided by Virginia Boyle.

Respectfully Submitted,
Cathy Millar, Secretary Williamsburg Bird Club
March 17, 2016