

Williamsburg Bird Club

Wednesday, April 20, 2016

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

Attendance: 37

President's Remarks:

- President Geoff Giles opened the meeting and greeted the gathering.
- Geoff welcomed one visitor from Hampton. There were no new members present.
- Geoff enquired about interesting bird sightings. Many members reported Ruby-throated Hummingbirds at their feeders. Purple Martins, Scarlet Tanager, White-eyed and Red-eyed Vireos were noted. A Yellow-throated Vireo was reported at White Oak Trail at Newport News Park. Five Cattle Egrets were spotted at Mainland Farm. Prothonotary, Prairie, and Pine Warblers and Purple Finches were reported. Members marveled how many Pine Siskins, White-throated Sparrows and Dark-eyed Juncos were still around.
- Geoff asked Dr. Mitchell Byrd to report on his recent survey of Bald Eagles. Dr. Byrd briefly described that this aerial survey was his 40th consecutive one. The first was in 1976 with only 32 nests counted resulting in 18 offspring. Since the ban of DDT, there has been a slow recovery. This time his estimated count was of 1,000 nests including 260 on the James River, 240 on the Rappahannock River, over 100 on the York, Pamunkey & Mattaponi, 200 on the Potomac River, and over 100 on the Eastern Shore. For many years there were no nests at all on the Eastern Shore. The average production over the past few years has ranged from 1.5-1.8 offspring per nest. So there are now many hundreds of new eagles being turned out each year. He was amazed to find two pairs of Bald Eagles nesting on the ground on barrier islands. There are others nesting on transmission towers and osprey platforms. He commented that more and more eagles are showing up in rehab centers with talon wounds indicating a lot of strife/competition due to the high population. The count was a result of 10 consecutive days of 9 hours each of flying.

Program: Cheryl Robinson, VP and Program Chairperson, asked Dr. Dan Cristol to introduce tonight's speakers who were the recipients of the Ruth Beck and Bill Sheehan Ornithology Research Grants sponsored by our club. He introduced the three graduate students who are completing their second year and graduating within a month or so. He voiced appreciation for the relationship between the WBC and the graduate programs and the difference the grants that we award make. The student's projects cost many thousands of dollars more than the substantial amount that the club gives. They have a colony of 500-1000 Zebra finches that have to be taken care of year round. Money also comes from the college, government agencies and various foundations. He hopes that we continue to keep W&M's ornithology program in our hearts.

- Sarah Wolf from Ohio and will be pursuing her PhD in Indiana presented: 'Assessing the Potential Toxic Effects of Methyl mercury on Hearing in the Zebra Finch'. She focused on auditory signaling in bird communication and how and why mercury impacts song complexity,

tonal frequency and singing rate. She explained that mercury affects bird species that have to learn their song. Her research question was whether Zebra finches exhibit hearing impairment in response to mercury in their diet. Using an auditory brainstem response test that records the auditory nerve's response to sound showed that mercury contaminated males required a higher volume to hear sound with resulting implications that they cannot hear warning calls as effectively. Contaminated male Zebra Finches having a shorter lower pitched less complex song.

- Virginia Greene from VA and who already has a Master's degree in Art & Design and provided some of the illustrations in tonight's presentations. Virginia presented: 'Mercury and Mate Choice in Zebra Finches'. Virginia started by emphasizing that environmental mercury is increasing globally. She had expected that her research would show that females would be more attracted to those males who'd had no mercury in their diet. She was surprised to find that in all 3 of her experiments regarding: (1) song attractiveness,(2) initial male attractiveness and (3) successful pairing, there was no significant preference by the females who were all mercury-free for males who'd had mercury or those who'd had none in their diet. This would imply that contaminated males can breed just as successfully with resulting contaminated eggs and embryo toxicity.
- Nicole Ingrassia from N. J. presented: 'Bird Strikes: Introduction and Project Significance'. Nicole noted that there is going to be an increase in the number of wind turbines and therefore the resulting importance of finding methods of creating a warning signal that allows birds to become more alert and to process the obstacle. She is working on using sound describing it as an acoustic lighthouse. She proceeded to describe her experiments showing how the use of a column of sound will cause an approaching bird to decelerate and angle up with feet first so that if there is contact there is less chance of fatality.

Field Trips: Jim Corliss, Field Trip Coordinator, reported on upcoming trips.

Jim asked Shirley Devan to report on the previous April field trip to the Dismal Swamp. Shirley reported that it was 34 degrees when they started at 7 am along the Washington Ditch. Highlights were listening to Swainson's and Hooded Warblers, Louisiana Water Thrushes, Barred Owls and Yellow-billed Cuckoos. Nice views of a White-eyed Vireo and a large flock of Rusty Blackbirds were appreciated. There were many Prothonotary and Yellow-rumped Warblers.

- **Friday & Saturday, May 13-14**, (later changed to **Thursday & Friday, May 12-13** due to availability of lodgings): Overnight trip to Highland County led by Matt Anthony. Group limited to 10 and fully subscribed. Hope to hear Chuck-will's widows and Eastern Whip-poor-wills at dusk. Warblers including Golden-winged Warblers are target birds.
- **Sunday, May 15:** Spring Bird Count

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

- **Wednesday, May 18:** Bob Schamerhorn will focus his presentation on the identification of warblers via his photographs and recordings of songs.
- There are no meetings in June, July and August.

- **Wednesday, September 21:** Cheryl was excited to report that she has engaged Katie Fallon who will come from West Virginia to talk about Cerulean Warblers. She is an outstanding writer on bird ecology and is the author of **Cerulean Blues** and a forthcoming book, **Vultures**.

Announcements:

- Geoff gave us a brief reminder about the official kick off for the Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas 2 (BABBA2) coming up soon. The last time such an atlas was compiled was about 30 years ago. He encouraged members to get involved and to contact Bill Williams, Shirley Devan or himself or go on-line. There are great resources available to participants. Shirley stated that she has written an article about it for our upcoming May newsletter, The Flyer. Shirley urged us to note in our day to day observations in yards or neighborhoods of breeding behavior such as a bird carrying food or nesting material and to report them to her. She asked to please note what, when and where you made the observation. One needn't be signed up for a block to make a contribution.
- Geoff asked Jan Lockwood to report on the bluebird trails. Jan noted that so far things look better this year than last year after the severe winter. The first eggs were recorded on March 16th. Last year it was April 5th. There are now 16 trails with a total of 284 boxes. To date 20% have activity. There are 2 1/2 times number of chicks and eggs than at the same time last year. Other species using the boxes, Chickadees, Carolina Wrens, and Titmice are also doing well with 4 times the number of chicks and eggs as last year. Last year there were often more Chickadees and Titmice but this year it looks as though the Bluebirds will hold their own. So far no problem with House Sparrows. A bat has been an occasional resident.

At the end of the meeting a free raffle was held.

Geoff adjourned the meeting at 8:40 pm.

Refreshments were provided by Linda Cole and Joanne Andrews.

Respectfully Submitted,
Cathy Millar, Secretary Williamsburg Bird Club
May 1, 2016