

THE WILLIAMSBURG FLYER

February 1986

Midwinter is upon us and February began appropriately with much of the ground covered in snow. The six inches or so of snow that fell at the end of January caused flocks of hungry birds to head for the feeders. There have been reports of dozens of pine siskins and goldfinches, though lesser numbers of purple finches and evening grosbeaks. I counted 21 species of birds at my feeder in one morning, including a robin eating bread and peanutbutter.

The February program will be given by Teta Kain of the Hampton Roads Bird Club. Teta has been very active over the past several years both locally and with the Virginia Society of Ornithology. She enjoys photography of birds as well and will be speaking on the topic of Nature, with an emphasis on birdlife. The time is 7:30, the date will be February 19th, the place is Millington Hall, Room 117. I am sure it will be a very entertaining evening.

Our field trip will be held on February 22nd and we will journey to Hog Island in Surry County. This is always a great trip, so plan to attend. Meet as usual at the Williamsburg Information Center at 7:30 a.m.

Some of our club members began the year in style by birding our area early in January and they were rewarded for their efforts. Rich Goll and Cindy Carlson found a mute swan along with two whistling swans on the York River on January 1st. The mute may be the first in our area outside of Hog Island in Surry County. Speaking of Hog Island, Rich and Cindy also found a sharp-tailed sparrow there on January 1st. Tom Armour, Bill Sheehan and Thom Blair were there on January 18th and found common mergansers. Despite the name these mergansers are hard to come by in this part of the state. On January 11, also at Hog Island, the Armours along with Norma and Grant Olson observed 10 immature bald eagles at one time--some flying, some perched in trees and some standing on the ice---an exciting sighting! Also on the 18th, Tom, Thom and Bill found a white-fronted goose with many Canadas at Flowerdew Plantation. Be on the lookout for this bird wherever large flocks of Canadas can be seen for there have been several reports this winter in Surry and Charles City Counties.

Dr. Byrd reports that the mid-winter bald eagle survey, which is done primarily from the air, tallied over 300 birds, with 109 of those on the Rappahanock River. Over half of the birds were immatures suggesting very good reproduction success over the past several years. The efforts of Dr. Byrd and others seem to be paying off nicely and let's hope that trend continues.

Jack Gross reports that a lone yellow throated warbler was seen eating small seeds at his feeder last month. Betty Williams discovered six brown headed nuthatches in her neighborhood at Skipwith. Rich and Cindy still have evening grosbeaks and up to 47 pine siskins. At least two male Eurasian widgeons have been seen on several occasions at Sunken Meadow pond in Surry County and at least one tree sparrow is holding down the usual spot at the end of the entrance road to Hog Island.

Please remember about the Nongame Wildlife Contribution that can be made by checking line 20 on the Virginia Individual Income Tax Return. Whole dollar amounts may be donated for the conservation and management of endangered species and other nongame wildlife. Nongame wildlife includes endangered, protected and threatened wildlife, aquatic wildlife, specialized habitat wildlife, mollusks, crustaceans and other invertebrates under the jurisdiction of the Commission of Game and Inland Fisheries. For further information about this, call (804)257-1000. If you are not due a tax refund, you may still contribute to the Commission at P.O. Box 11104, Richmond, Virginia 23230-1104 attention: Nongame Program.



Our membership is now over 150 strong, a very good showing for a community of our size. We continue to be one of the larger, and more active of clubs and are proud to continue our traditions of buying books for the library and awarding grants to students of biology at the College of William and Mary.

Copies of the membership application for the Virginia Society of Ornithology are enclosed for anyone wishing to be a part of that organization. With membership comes a newsletter and copies of the official journal entitled The Raven. The V.S.O. organizes an annual conference and several excellent bird outings including trips to North Carolina's Outer Banks, Chincoteague, and Back Bay. The V.S.O. now boasts over 1000 members.

The recent V.S.O. newsletter contained lots of interesting information including a report of Virginia's first summer record of a gray-cheeked thrush in Falls Church and details of hawk watching in Virginia last fall. Among the impressive statistics were 21,286 hawks tallied at Kiptopeke, at the southern tip of the Eastern Shore. There were over 1,000 ospreys seen, over 12,000 sharp-shinned hawks, 600 northern harriers, 4,000 kestrels and at least two golden eagles. In the west, Rockfish Gap recorded over 24,000 birds in 66 days. Harvey's Knob also in the western part of the state put in 56 days of coverage and recorded over 8,000 birds including over 6,000 broadwinged hawks and six golden eagles. Hawk watching is very enjoyable, exciting and very much alive in Virginia.

During the winter, barred owls can often be seen sitting along roads. I have received several reports of this in January including a bird in the early morning and late afternoon on Longhill Road near Eastern State Hospital.

A Say's Phoebe is near Bluegrass in Highland County, west of Staunton. The bird has apparently been around since Thanksgiving. It may be feeding on insects around the chimney of a nearby house. I was lucky enough to see this bird on January 20th in very snowy and windy conditions. The bird is in very good plumage, a rich cinnamon color below and grayish-brown on the upperparts. There is a rather dark cap and the bird wags its tail as do our local phoebes. Say's phoebes are a highly migratory western species that may only have been recorded in Virginia once or twice. Phoebes are able to switch their diets from insects to fruits and berries in the winter and are thus quite hardy.

I want to thank everyone for calling and writing to me with information for our newsletter. Please keep it up! Once again, here's how to contact us: Brian Taber, 104 Druid Court, Williamsburg or 253-1181.

The early February warm spell has the towhees singing "drink your tea" already and the robins have arrived en masse.

#### BIRD OF THE SEASON: Eurasian Widgeon *Anas penelope*

The Eurasian widgeon is a rare but regular visitor to our area of the East Coast. It is not known if the bird breeds in North America, but it is recorded, usually as only a single bird, in the fall and winter where there are large concentrations of waterfowl. In Virginia, sightings have come from Chincoteague, Craney Island in Portsmouth, Fisherman Island on the Eastern Shore, the York River in York County, Newport News Park, Lake Powell in Williamsburg, St. George's field near the Jamestown Ferry and twice during the last four years at Sunken Meadow pond in Surry County.

Eurasian widgeons are often seen in the company of American widgeon which they resemble in size and shape. The head of the male Eurasian widgeon is reddish-brown and the sides of the bird are grayish. In contrast, the American widgeon has reddish sides and grayish head. The forehead and crown stripe of the Eurasian is creamy-buff while the American's is white. Separation of female Eurasians from female Americans is difficult in the field. The upper wings appear about the same in both species, however, the "wingpits" or axillars are darker in the Eurasian. The size is about that of gadwalls, wood ducks and shovelers, slightly smaller than

pintails and mallards. Eurasian widgeons are largely vegetarians, favoring pond-weeds, widgeon grass and eel grass in particular. The bird is found throughout northern Europe and Asia to Africa and India---a worldwide traveller.