



THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

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NEXT MEETING

The next meeting of the Williamsburg Bird Club will be on Wednesday, February 16 at 7:30 in Room 117, Millington Hall, William and Mary. We will enjoy the program that Dan Cristal had arranged for September that was wiped out by the hurricane of that date. Peter Smallwood, an ecologist professor at the University of Richmond, will present the results of some of his studies of the Kestrel entitled, "Family Planning for Kestrels."

GREAT TRIP TO THE BAY-BRIDGE TUNNEL ISLANDS

The eleven people who left Williamsburg at seven in the morning for the field trip to the Bay-Bridge Tunnel Islands will long remember how cold it was (10- 12 degrees), how bright and beautiful the ocean was out there and how many great birds were seen. An Asian gull, a black-tailed gull that has been seen in Virginia only a very few times, was the highlight. However, some of us added as many as five birds to our life lists. In addition to the black-tail, these other gulls were seen: bonapartes, great black-backed, herring and ringbills. In addition to such common York River ducks as black, bufflehead, goldeneye, lesser scaup and red-breasted mergansers, we saw lots of old squaw (recently renamed, long-tailed), a few red-heads, three harlequins, a lone female common eider and all three scoters, black, surf and white-winged. There were also a couple of common loons diving about and from time to time the purple sandpipers inhabiting the rocks posed long enough to be identified. There was no missing the great cormorants that stood like sentinels scattered over those same rocks. Double-crested

cormorants and a few brown pelicans rounded out the sea birds. When we stopped at the entrance toll booth a brown creeper was working on the nearby live oak.

After all of that, one car load added another great stop. They were all the way back in Hampton on I-64 when someone remembered a report of white-winged crossbills being seen in Portsmouth, so they back tracked down I-664. Result: all got an excellent look at a male crossbill.

The lucky participants in this outing were Tom Armour, who provided the leadership and Alex Minarik who organized the event, plus Joy Archer, Ruth Beck, Dan Cristal, Bill Holcombe, Mike Minarik, Richard Stanley, Jandy and Randy Strickland and Brian Taber.

If you would like to get a letter that permits you to stop and bird these four islands, you may call 757-331-2960 to request one. The staff will quickly supply you with a letter that is good for a year. You may drive to the 4th island and return for a single fee of \$10. And if you would like to try to see the crossbills, call Shirley Bolinaga (757-483-2505) to make arrangements. The birds have been viewed on her property.

FEBRUARY FIELD TRIP

Alex Minarik has arranged for a bird walk on the Greensprings Nature Trail Saturday, February 19. Julie Hotchkiss will be the leader. The group will gather on the parking lot at the rear of the school and set off on the trail at 7:30 AM. Be sure to wear rugged, water-proof boots and dress warmly.

FIELD NOTES

January produced some really excellent sightings of winter birds. The Bay-Bridge Tunnel Field Trip reported elsewhere seemed to start things off and then came the snowstorm. Brian Taber patrolled the Colonial Parkway from Jamestown to College Creek shortly after the storm. In the narrow strip of grass along the edge revealed by snow plows he found a host of birds. These included dozens of killdeer, many woodcock, 31 fox sparrows, some American pipits, one snow bunting, a horned lark, and large numbers of towhees and brown thrashers. Brian also spotted common snipe near the bridge over Powhatan Creek in front of Jamestown Island. Bill Williams had almost the same experience Friday after the snow, except that he counted 53 fox sparrows along that same road and then found a large number of ducks huddled under the College Creek Bridge. The tally on that group was four pied-billed grebes, 26 black ducks, 18 wood ducks, 30 mallards, one lesser scaup, 27 ring necks, two northern shovelers, three American widgeon and ten common snipe. Both of these highly experienced birders urge club members, who can, to make this run along the parkway shortly after it is plowed to find birds that are otherwise quite scarce for us. Incidentally, Bill Williams also spotted a horned lark on the Greensprings nature trail in back of Jamestown High School, although he says that the snow and his own schedule have held down January sightings there.

Joy Archer checked the Vineyards pond and found five pairs of ring necked ducks, four pairs of American widgeon, and one pair of black ducks. She also spotted six pied-billed grebes on Lake Matoka.

Our resident winter song birds were also seen in other places. Joy Archer had red-breasted nuthatches, a yellow-bellied sapsucker and fox sparrows in her yard. Ruth Beck reported seven evening grosbeak in the trees at the Williams-burg Crossing Shopping Center on two different occasions. The house wren remains in Bill Sheehan's back yard with the usual sapsucker. Bill Holcombe had a brown creeper show up in his yard on two occasions and a hermit thrush shows up from time to time. And Marilyn Zeigler got a hairy woodpecker near Jones Pond.

Due to the loss of our much beloved record keeper, Bill Sheehan, the snow storm and Joe Doyle's heart attack we will not be able to do our usual round up of favorite birding spots this month. Joe is feeling much better now and expects to be off of his heavy medication schedule in a week or so. However, he did call to pass along a report from a friend in Queens Lake that a veritable cloud of blue birds had descended on his pyracantha bushes and holly trees in early February. The friend estimated that there were at least a 100 bluebirds in the group and "maybe as many as 200."

WILD BIRDS UNLIMITED REBATE

Wild Birds recently delivered a check for \$450 to our treasurer for purchases made by club members at their store during the period March 1998 through December 1999.

RATING WILLIAMSBURG AS A BIRD WATCHING AREA

The Virginia Society of Ornithology's fall journal publishes a comparison of the previous Christmas Bird Counts made in 46 different areas of Virginia. While hardly a perfect tool for the purpose, it does give us a chance to compare birding in our area with all of the other 45.

First of all, we were ninth in total number of species with 112, almost a tie with Newport News' 113. Not surprisingly, Cape Charles/Kiptopeke was first with 168, 30 species greater than number two which was Little Creek.

Note how accessible those areas are to us. In fact, the first twelve count areas are all in an area bounded by Chincoteague to Cape Charles, to Back Bay, to the Great Dismal Swamp, to Hopewell, and to Mathews County. Only Chincoteague is more than an hour and a half away from here.

Comparing our own to those twelve areas, we are 4th in Canada geese, 1st in mute swans, 2nd in green-winged teal, 2nd in canvas backs, 1st in ring-necked ducks, 1st in ruddy ducks, 2nd in bald eagles, 1st in royal terns, 3rd in great horned owls, 3rd in belted kingfishers, tied with Hopewell for 1st in red-headed woodpeckers, 3rd for yellow-bellied sapsuckers, 3rd for pileated woodpeckers,

3rd for blue jays, 3rd for titmouse, 2nd for white-breasted nuthatch, 1st for brown-headed nuthatch, 3rd for ruby-crowned kinglet, 2nd for brown thrasher, 3rd for yellow-rumped warbler, had the only parula warbler and one of two yellow chats, 3rd in chipping sparrows, 3rd in song sparrows, and 3rd in rusty blackbirds.

All of this is just confirmation of what we already know — that we are blessed with a wonderful birding area! And maybe it raises the question: are we doing all we can to keep it that way?

BILL SHEEHAN PASSED AWAY

We think that most members of the club are aware that Bill Sheehan, a charter member of the bird club, an honorary life-time member, the club's first secretary and official record keeper from day one, passed away January 19. We include this notice for anyone who missed that sad news.

There have been just too many people close to Bill, who were unavailable for contact to compile a "Remembrances of Bill Sheehan" for this issue of *The Flyer*, but that will appear next month. There has been no local ceremony associated with his death and none is planned. If you have a favorite Bill Sheehan story to include in his remembrances next month, please call Bill Holcombe at 229-8057 or drop me a note at 4705 Lady Slipper Path, Williamsburg, Va. 231288.

GREAT BACK YARD BIRD COUNT

The Audubon Society and the Cornell Lab, joint sponsors of this event, are asking every birder in North America to check the feeders and vicinity on the count days of February 18, 19, 20 and 21 and to get the information into the tabulators. "Through Great backyard Bird Count 2000 individuals of all ages and skill levels can help scientists document the abundance and distribution of North America's bird populations at the start of the first spring migration of the new millennium," says the notice from the sponsors. "Participants can count the numbers and kinds of birds seen in their backyards, local parks, schoolyards, or other nearby areas during any or all of the four count days."

Here are the instructions:

For each day of participation count all species and the highest number of any one species seen at one time. (They don't want you counting the same birds twice.) Keep each day's count separate and don't combine counts. They'd love to get four counts from each participant but will be happy with all one day reports received.

All reports are entered via the Internet at BirdSource <http://www.birdsource.org>, a web site developed by Cornell lab and National Audubon. (This web site is extremely user friendly and I had no trouble sending even the first report last year.)

You may a) file your own reports on the web, b) take them to Wild Birds Unlimited who will file them for you, or c) mail them to Bill Holcombe, 4705 Lady Slipper Path, Williamsburg, VA 23188, or drive by and put them in my newspaper tube. Remember, I need to be able to clearly distinguish the counts by the day and date of the count. Last year there was a space to add the name your favorite bird. Just add it at the end of your count if you care to do it, like "My favorite bird is the _____." Data will be accepted for at least a week after February 21 and perhaps even longer. No cut off date was specified.

Remember that we will all be doing a big favor for all of our regular resident birds and for the winter residents who show up so regularly each year. This program is designed to include all of those very common visitors and if you pick up some wonderful strangers, so much the better. Please do plan to have your feeders full and spend the time that you can. Last year, the first year of full promotion, there were 42,000 participants.

Dr. John Fitzpatrick, director of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology says, "Birding is the fastest-growing outdoor recreation with some 60 million participants. If each one of them can spend just 15 minutes noting the birds they see, even if only while sipping morning coffee, eating lunch or taking a relaxing stroll, imagine the kind of snapshot of North American winter bird distribution this would create."

BIRD OF THE MONTH

Old Squaw Duck by Bill Holcombe

Why the Old Squaw Duck this month? Probably

because seeing them on the January field trip was so memorable and the name is such an intriguing one. I don't believe that we've ever done any of the sea ducks before. Incidentally, the name became attached because these are among the noisiest ducks known and the name is an allusion to its garrulity. Interestingly, other common names are old granny, old wife and old Molly. Peterson identifies the sea ducks as old squaw, harlequin, common eider, king eider and the three scoters: surf, white winged and black.

The old squaw go through three plumage changes each year, a bright winter plumage, an eclipse plumage which occurs between changes and a summer bright plumage. The males differ from the females. Rather than make those long confusing lists, we'll stick to its winter appearance (as it looks at the Bay-Bridge Tunnel Islands now.) It is a good sized duck about 20 inches long. The male has an extremely long pointed tail similar to but longer than a pintail's. The bill is rather stubby for a duck and is dark tipped, with a yellow base. The overall coloring is white but with a dark bridle around its lower breast that loops around behind the neck and forms a dark line down the back. The tail and wings are also this dark color and there are dark blotches on the cheeks. The female has dark wings, white face and a dark cheek spot. She is darker overall than the male.

Its main nesting grounds in North America reach from Alaska along the Arctic coasts of the continent to the coasts and islands of Greenland, where it is very abundant. It also nests in Asia. It winters in large bodies of water such as the Great Lakes and along the Atlantic Coast to North Carolina and the Pacific coast to southern California. It can be found in large lakes in Kentucky, Tennessee and Nebraska. When migrating, it flies high in irregular flocks or single file in long lines.

This is one of the deepest diving ducks and has reached depths of 180 feet. Deep dives by large flocks have led to disastrous accidents in the Great Lakes where thousands of them have died in fishing nets. At Dunkirk, New York one report from the 1890 speaks of 5,000 birds being killed in one haul. One fisherman on Lake Michigan reported netting 27,000 old squaws in one week period in 1946. More typically the ducks dive in

more moderate depths to reach common blue mussels and other shellfish. They also eat shrimp, crabs and other crustaceans. On their breeding grounds they also eat roots, leaves, buds and seeds of aquatic plants and some fish.

Nests are usually within six to 30 feet of water, which may be either fresh or salt. Nests are roughly pulled together by the female from nearby weeds and grass, well concealed under high grass or low bushes. Nests are frequently mixed with arctic tern's nesting areas. The terns protect both the ducks' nests and their own with savage attacks on egg-seeking gulls, jaegers and ravens. Eggs are laid May through July and a clutch of six to eight is usual. Incubation by the female takes about 24 days and the young fly 35 days after hatching. The female leaves the nest unguarded from time to time but covers the eggs when she leaves. When the chicks hatch she stays on the nest for two or three full days and this process bonds the chicks to her.

These ducks not only keep up a steady chatter when not on the nest, but they are also constantly in motion. In flight they twist and turn so that an observer is looking at backs and then breasts and then backs again. They alight by dropping suddenly onto the water with a great splash and then keep moving, changing direction, diving and popping up. One observer called the result a "white capped whirl pool."

Our best bet for seeing this bird is to visit the Bay Bridge-Tunnel Islands during the winter months, although they are not uncommon on the Chesapeake Bay.