



THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

Volume 24, Number 4

April 2000

NEXT MEETING

The next meeting of the Williamsburg Bird Club will be held on Wednesday, April 19 at 7:30 p.m. in Room 117 Millington Hall on the Campus of William and Mary. Dan Cristol has arranged for Jenny Gamble, winner of the Bird Club Research Grant for 2000, to discuss her research, "Do Birds Play?," a fascinating look at whether or not birds and other animals actually play. This includes the heart of her research, "Do Gulls Play?"

FIELD NOTES FOR MARCH

To quote Bill Sheehan from last month's *Flyer*, "Spring always comes and the birds always come back," and they started arriving right on time in late March. On March 25, Lee Schuster, Ruth Beck and Joy Archer reported **yellow-throated warblers**; Lee's at York River State Park, Ruth's at Barhamsville and Joy's at Jamestown Island, in the trees just across the bridge at the entrance. And they both reported **osprey** on nesting platforms. Ruth, on the same day, had **Louisiana water thrush** and the first **blue-gray gnatcatcher** — on March 26, Bill Williams found **yellow-throated warbler** and **blue-gray gnatcatchers** on the Green Springs Nature trail in back of Jamestown High School. There were also **wood ducks**, **blue-winged teal** and **green-winged teal** in that area. A week later an **ovenbird** was on the trail — on March 21 Joy Archer had seen seven **greater yellowlegs** in the puddled large lot just outside of Jamestown that once contained a water slide. She also saw **pine warblers** and nesting **osprey** that day — on March 27 the **Louisiana waterthrushes** were in back of Lee Schuster's

house — Alex Minarik saw her **yellow-throated warbler** at Waller Mill Park on March 29 and got a **blue-gray gnatcatcher** the same day. She's also had **purple finches** at her feeder and the **wild turkey** family continues to wander in and out of her yard.

A run down the York River Parkway on the 25th also produced a great deal of **osprey** activity, some fishing the river and others gathering long grass for nests. A **great egret** was in King's Creek — only three **tundra swans** were left at Indian Fields Creek — **ruddy ducks**, in greatly reduced numbers but in much brighter dress, were in scattered small groups all of the way to the Weapons Station dock. Only two **buffleheads** and one **horned grebe** were seen with them. There was also a lone **brown pelican** patrolling the river and a single **coot** in a pond to the right of the road. There were at least four **common loons** in bright breeding plumage near the York Beach — Julie Hotchkiss had a group of 16 **tundra swans** right in front of her house on the James River which she guessed were preparing for the trip north.

There were also signs of spring on a trip to Hog Island on March 29. **Laughing gulls** in their full summer, black-headed dress accompanied the ferry, flocks of **tree swallows** flitted at Chippokes Swamp and a **phoebe** was nesting under the bridge there. There were more **tree swallows** at Hog Island. The presence of a mere handful of **Canada geese**, a single **pied-billed grebe** and a lone **coot**, the only other water fowl, also indicated the season. A few days later at Hog Island, Bill Williams found a group of **northern shovelers**, four **pectoral sandpipers** and two **least sandpipers**. There was also a group of about 50 **yellow legs**, about evenly divided between the

greater and lesser. Bill also saw 21 **bald eagles** in the air at one time over Hog Island and almost crashed into a **wild turkey** about a half mile from the Hog Island gate. One that was running across the road decided to double back! The **phoebe** is back under the bridge at Hickory Signpost Road.

Other sights of interest: Grace Doyle watched in astonishment as a pair of **red-tailed hawks** landed on her deck and performed their spring mating. Grace also saw a rare bird for these parts when she spotted a **tree sparrow** at Camp Peary. She said that she had to watch it for some minutes with book in hand before she was convinced. Mid-month, Charlie Drubel called to say that his backyard was filled with more **white-throated sparrows** than he had ever seen there at one time — Tom Armour had five **pied-billed grebes** on Kingsmill Pond and a **barred owl** late in the month — and a **barred owl** continues to hoot early in the morning near Graylin Woods.

A bird rescuer brought Ruth Beck a **pied-billed grebe** found injured on a tennis court during a rain storm. The grebe had apparently mistaken the tennis court for the surface of a pond and crash-landed onto it. Ruth fed it some fish, nursed it along overnight and released it onto her lake, where it was joined by another grebe and was soon diving about. Bill Williams believes that the snow and ice in early winter may have taken a toll of **Carolina wrens**. He says he is finding seven or eight now where he would expect 16-20. Fox sparrows that were reported under feeders early in the month seemed to be pretty much gone by the end of the month, which is close to the Annotated List last date of April 4.

PREDATOR GUARDS FOR BLUE-BIRD BOXES AT YORK RIVER STATE PARK

The Williamsburg Bird Club, Wildbirds Unlimited and Bird Club members have collaborated to purchase and install twenty raccoon/snake predator guards on boxes at York River State Park. Wildbirds Unlimited granted the Bird Club a generous discount on tubular predator guards.

As of April 1, six predator guards had been installed, and volunteers will install the other 14

guards before May 1. Guards will be installed on the boxes that suffered the greatest loss of eggs and fledglings in 1999. Also, the staff and park volunteers at YRSP have moved ten boxes to more favorable locations in an effort to boost the number of bluebirds fledged in year 2000. Thanks to Brad Thomas and his team for their cooperation.

Bluebirds and chickadees made an early start this spring. As of April 1, there were 14 partial or complete nests (bluebird and chickadees) and 25 bluebird eggs. There were five bluebird eggs as early as March 19. The park has a total of 41 boxes.

Volunteers who share the weekly monitoring of the boxes at the park are: Dorothy Whitfield, Chris & Tony Dion, Dorothy Geyer, Terry & Jack Johnston, Mark Gleaton and Shirley Devan.

DON SCHWAB LEADS FIELD TRIP TO GREAT DISMAL SWAMP

On Saturday, April 22 Don Schwab, the Wildlife Diversity Biologist for the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, will again lead the field trip to the Great Dismal Swamp. Conditions should be right for seeing a good selection of migrating warblers and Alex Minarik says that she will stick her neck out and “guarantee sighting prothonotary warblers.” This is a primary nesting place of the drab little Swainson’s warbler that attracts avid birders from thousands of miles around. For the last two years the bird has been heard but not seen and we are hoping that this, our third trip there, will be a winner. An early start is essential for this trip. It takes an hour plus to get there, so the group will gather at The Colony Shopping Center (home of the Fresh Market) on Jamestown Road at 6:15 a.m. for car pool arranging and departure. You are urged to bring lunch, drink and bug spray and to wear long sleeves and a hat.

MARCH FIELD TRIP TO THE VINEYARDS

March 18th was a bright clear day but a very cold and windy one when Randy Coleman led a group

of fifteen birders on a tour of the Vineyards. The ducks were cooperative: wood ducks, ring necked ducks, lesser scaup and pied-billed grebes were found on the ponds. A large flock of cedar wax-wings seen on a small ornamental tree made it look like a Christmas decoration. An early osprey was spotted and sharp-shinned and red-tailed hawks soared over head. In all, 37 species were identified. Those in attendance included Joy Archer, Luanne Broad, Shirley Devan, Grace and Joe Doyle, Dorothy Geyer, Barbara Hitt, Phyllis Jennings, Cynthia Long, Alex Minarik, Carol Welsh and Marilyn Zeigler.

SUNDAY, MAY 7 SET FOR SPRING BIRD COUNT

Brian Taber believes that this is the perfect date for the Spring Count — near the peak of the migration and before the foliage becomes totally dense. You are all invited to participate in which ever territory you choose, except for the ones that are closed. As in the Christmas count our area is divided into nine sections, with a leader accepting responsibility for covering each area. Groups are usually in the field by 7 a.m. and work the area until late afternoon. They then gather at the William and Mary Biology Department to compile a single record of the day's activity. If you want to participate, call the leader of the area where you would like to go and arrange a meeting place and time. This is a great opportunity to improve your knowledge of birding areas and bird identification.

Skimino — Bettye Fields 930-0177

Middle Plantation — Hugh Beard 221- 0499

Hog Island — Brian Taber 253-1181

Kingsmill — Tom Armour 229-2363

Cheatham Annex — Bill Williams 229-6095

College Woods — Ruth Beck 566-8234 (home)
or 221-2217 (work)

Jolly Pond — Lee and Dave Schuster 565-6148

Note: Camp Peary is led by Joe Doyle and Jamestown Island is led by Dot Silsby. These groups are closed.

We hope that you go and enjoy it as much as those of us who would not miss one of these counts. You need to bring lunch, something to drink, bug spray and hat. Long sleeves are recommended.

While there is a fair amount of walking, most areas include moving about from one place to another by car. You do not have to attend the count compiling session at 5 p.m. You do have to contribute \$5 for Audubon, defraying the expense they incur in compiling thousands of reports.

C.V.W.O. NOW IN BUSINESS

The Coastal Virginia Wildlife Observatory (formerly, K.E.S.T.R.E.L.) has a spring staff of two banders who will be working from March 15 until the end of May. While they will be at work every day, special programs and demonstrations on Saturday and Sunday will make those days more interesting for visitors. There will also be special programs on International Migratory Bird Day, May 13.

Brian Taber says that the migration is a bit more advanced there on the coast and they have already banded red-eyed and white-eyed vireos. On April first, while crossing the bridge, Brian saw a hummingbird headed south.

BILL SHEEHAN

Bill's ashes were interred at Arlington National Cemetery on March 24th with full military honors, including a caisson drawn by four white horses with outriders, a full band, a rifle platoon, a color guard and a ceremonial squad, all led by a Navy Captain. The fifty people in attendance included a large family group, a group from the Bird Club and a group of other friends from Williamsburg. Most appropriately, a red-tailed hawk circled the ceremony and a pair of geese did a fly-by right at the end.

Bill's memory will be honored by the creation of the Bill Sheehan Fund. This fund will be used primarily to fund the kind of research grants that the Club has been supporting. It also will be used to erect a bench in Bill's memory that will be placed in a public area somewhere that is conducive to quiet contemplation of some part of the natural world. Bird Club members may contribute to this fund by mailing a check made out to "The Bill Sheehan Fund" to our treasurer, Chuck Rend.

VSO ANNUAL MEETING

The Virginia Society of Ornithology will hold its Annual meeting in Staunton, Virginia, May 12, 13 and 14. Those of you who helped Ruth Beck put on that meeting here a few years back will remember that the working sessions are filled with the reading of research papers. The mornings and afternoons are spent on field trips. This year they'll go to places with intriguing names such as: Augusta Springs Wetlands, Chimney Hollow Trail, Deerfield Ruffed Grouse Management Area, Elliot Knob and Humpback Mountain Picnic Area, Augusta Springs Wetlands, Chimney Hollow Trail, Deerfield Ruffed Grouse Management Area, Elliot Knob and Humpback Mountain Picnic Area.

The meeting is headquartered in the Holiday Inn Conference Center, I-81 and Rt. 275, Staunton, VA (1-800-932-9061.) Rooms for participants are priced at \$82 per night, double or single. The registration fee is \$20 per person plus \$20 for the Saturday night banquet. If you want to go, write to VSO Meeting, C/O Yu Lee Lerner, 1020 West Beverly St., Staunton, VA 24401. Include your name, address, phone number and choice of chicken, beef or vegetarian for the banquet. Make your check out to the "Augusta Bird Club."

RUFIOUS HUMMINGBIRDS: A REAL VIRGINIA PRESENCE

The spring VSO Newsletter tells in great detail about the banding of two Rufous Hummingbirds in Vienna, VA, November 11 and December 17. Not only were the two seen together but for a time they were accompanied by a third. The VSO report says that up until now suspected rufous hummingbirds could only be classified as *Selasphorus*, a hummingbird subclassification that includes the rufous. However, with this hard evidence, it is far more likely that the rufous hummingbird is more widespread in the mid-Atlantic region than we had previously believed.

The bird banding was done by Mary Gustason, of the Bird Banding Lab in Laurel, MD. Interestingly, she removed two tail feathers from the bird banded in November to make the identification absolutely positive. The same bird was

recaptured in mid-December and those two tail feathers had already grown halfway back.

The moral of this little story is to check your field guide for the rufous hummingbird, as you can no longer depend upon all hummers here being ruby-throats.

BIRD OF THE MONTH

Barn Swallow by Bill Holcombe

The sight of all of the tree swallows on March 28 prompted me to look up that bird. I found that it is not as reliable a harbinger of spring as its cousin the barn swallow. While the tree swallow is migratory, it has been found in mild winters as far north as New Jersey and has been seen in our area in small numbers all months of the year. On the other hand, the barn swallow is a true spring arrival throughout much of the U.S. and southern Canada and as far north as Alaska. Our club's annotated list shows an early date of March 11 and a late date of November 12. The Alaskan barn swallows may make the longest migration of any song bird, as they cover 7,000 miles on the trip to Argentina and then do it again on their return.

The swallow's English family name comes from the Anglo-Saxon, *swalwe*. There are 79 species world wide and eleven of them are in North America. The family includes martins but not the swifts, a totally different species. The flight of the entire swallow family is swift and darting with quick, irregular shifts of direction. They fly with gapping, open mouths that scoop in thousands of air borne insects. Swallows tend to fly at lower levels than other insect eating flyers.

The barn swallow is our only swallow with the deeply forked, *swallow tail*. Tails of our other swallows are more notched than forked. The male is a metallic blue-black above with a red-brown forehead and a rich, red-brown breast. It is lighter colored below. Females are similar but with duller colors. Both have white markings on the tail near the fork. The bird is 5 to 7 inches long and has a 12 to 13-inch wingspan.

The barn swallow leaves its South American winter range as the temperatures change there. Migration dates can vary by as much as two weeks and these birds tend to follow the temperature

band of 48 degrees, arriving here the second or third week of March. (I haven't seen any nor had any reports, so I don't know when they arrived this year.) They migrate by day, reaching here in early March, southern Canada by late April and Alaska in May. Both sexes engage in nest building. They make small pellets of mud or clay mixed with straw or dried grass which are then assembled against the wall of a barn, under the eave of a house, in a cave or the wall of a stone overhang. The result is a strong half cup firmly attached to the vertical surface (or a fuller cup on a horizontal surface), and lined with feathers, horsehair and fine grass. The nests can take two weeks to build. These birds spend so much time on the wing and so little time on the ground that their weak legs and feet turn pellet making into a laborious process. The birds commonly nest in colonies but single nests are not rare. The nesting choice was so generally a barn in the rural developing United States that this name persists. It was given by the country folk who loved the bird for its spring arrival, its insect eating habits and its toleration of human presence. In England the same bird is known only as "the swallow."

From the nesting site the male pursues the female in long courtship flights over fields or ponds, uttering a distinctive courtship twitter of, *kvik-kvik, wit-wit*. This is clearly different from the sound of the cliff swallow that may nest in the same barn. It is believed that this distinction avoids interbreeding of the two species. Four to five white speckled eggs are laid April through July with two broods raised each year in the warmer areas. Incubation takes 13 to 17 days and the birds fly 18 to 23 days later. A rather unusual aspect of this cycle is that the family then stays together in the roosting area for another week and a half.

The birds feeding flights take them skimming over the surface of lawns, fields, lakes and ponds where they eat grass hoppers, crickets, dragon flies, tree hoppers, leaf hoppers and moths. The birds drink and bathe while skimming over water. Banding records show birds reaching ages of seven years and eight years and 3 months. There was a European barn swallow that reached the age of 16. They have been clocked in flight at as much as 46 miles per hour.

Swallows gather in huge flocks before leaving in the fall migration, sometimes lining telephone lines adjacent to marshes for very long distances. The birds then roost on the reeds and stiff grasses of the marshes. These huge flocks disappear when the time comes to go south, which lead Europeans in medieval times to believe that the birds hibernated in the mud of the marshes and reappeared in the spring.

In our area these birds are seen almost anywhere there are ponds, lawns or fields producing insects. They are quite common along the Colonial Parkway and are found in large numbers near the old Freedom Farm and at Drummond's Field.

References: The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds by John K. Terres, Roger Tory Peterson's Field Guide and the Williamsburg Annotated List.