



THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

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THE NEXT MEETING MAY 17

The Williamsburg Bird Club will next meet at 7:30 p.m. in Room 117, Millington Hall, William & Mary campus, on Wednesday, May 17, 2000. Dan Cristol, our program chair, will share with us some research results, other information and his own thoughts on "Collision of Birds with High Communication Towers." Dan says that millions of birds are dying unnecessarily from these collisions because practical solutions to the problem are not being implemented.

FIELD NOTES FOR APRIL

The pace of the spring migration jumped up a notch in April as it always does. Lee Schuster's April 7 trip to York River State Park produced **Louisiana water thrush, black and white warbler, northern parula, ovenbird, white-eyed vireo, blue-gray gnatcatcher** and a **summer tanager**. She also reported that the **purple finches** that have spent most of the winter on her feeder are still there. On April 9 Julie Hotchkiss also had a **white-eyed vireo** and a **green-backed heron** and also saw the last of the **pied-billed grebes** this spring on the James River. She did say that they appeared to be a flock gathering for their trip north. Dan Cristol reported a **pine siskin** at his feeder April 16, just about a year after one showed up in '99. Tom McCary reports seeing and hearing **white-eyed vireos** in the field in back of his home on Richmond Road near St. Bede's every day since mid-month and they have occasionally entered his yard. He has never had them in this area before and thinks that they may be nesting. Tom also walked the trail along Lake Matoka and found that the **green-**

winged teal and **gadwall** have finally left their winter quarters, but five male **wood ducks** have at least temporarily taken over. Tom's **red-breasted nuthatches**, after visiting all winter, made their last appearance April 27. They had first appeared Dec. 1. Ruth Beck got her first **hummingbird** April 12, which was the earliest report that reached us. She also had five **swallows** over the lake on the same day; **barn, tree, rough-wing, bank and purple martin**. Ruth also reminds us that Craney Island is now open again and there are lots of shore birds there: **dowitchers, plover, peeps and sandpipers** plus the lovely **horned larks**.

Tom Armour has had wonderful success in his backyard where he installed a dripping bird bath and then hooked his garden hose in a nearby tree and set the nozzle for a fine spray. The attraction has been hugely successful and along with all of the usual back yard birds, other visitors have included **black and white warbler, black-poll, yellow rumps, common yellowthroat, red-start, red-eyed vireo, indigo bunting, scarlet tanager, and cat birds**. He also reported that the **mute swans** on the Kingsmill pond had a brood of six and then lost one. And a **wood duck** pair had one chick trailing about.

Alex Minarik has also had some backyard excitement. **Acadian flycatchers** started singing toward the end of the month but the spring migration brought **scarlet and summer tanagers** into her yard. A **prothonotary warbler** and a **black-throated green warbler** came to the edge of nearby woods. When Alex thought that she heard a **veery** she played the veery song on her tape player. The bird came from the woods to a bush near the house answering the tape, "and its song

was actually more beautiful than the taped version.”

Marilyn Zeigler also had a stunning backyard experience when an **evening grosbeak** appeared on her feeder on Easter Sunday. Brian Taber had exceptional luck while doing his usual mid-day hawk watch. Within two successive days he observed a **golden eagle** and a **Mississippi kite** coming across the James River. And Bill Williams had that kind of luck when he found **cattle egret, common moorhen** and an **American bittern** at the Green Spring Trail in back of the high school. Bill also found **brown-headed nuthatches** there for the first time mid-month. He says that the **chickadees** and **grackles** are starting to fledge there and a **swainson thrush** was seen May 6. Joy Archer reported from the Hickory Sign Post Road bridge the presence of **parula, black and white warblers, white-eyed vireo, wood duck, blue-gray gnatcatcher** and the ever present **phoebe**. On Jamestown Island she found **yellow throated warbler, white-eyed vireo, ovenbird and royal, Forster's and Caspian terns**. And, her backyard excitement includes nesting blue birds and a **Baltimore oriole**, plus a **common yellowthroat** in the bird bath.

ANNUAL BIRD CLUB PICNIC

Details of this year's picnic are not sufficiently settled as this issue of *The Flyer* goes to press. Accordingly, the picnic will be announced by postcard.

SPRING BIRD COUNT

The chart is not yet complete and will be included in the next issue of *The Flyer*.

RESCUING A SNARLED OSPREY

When Gail Taylor of Kingspoint called Julie Hotchkiss to report “either an eagle or an osprey on my deck all tangled up in fishing line” she got a 911 response from Brian Taber assisted by Bill Holcombe. The bird turned out to be an osprey that was wound around with fishing line. Worse, the line was anchored by fish hooks caught in his wing and in a foot. Mrs. Taylor said that he had

been thrashing around on the deck for about a half hour trying to free himself.

Brian quickly took charge, and wearing heavy gloves, held the bird's feet firmly together. A small towel draped over the osprey's head seemed to calm it down and allowed Bill to cut the hooks using Brian's wire cutter. Then he removed them and the wraps of line. Not knowing how much damage had been done to the bird's wings, Brian set him on the back of a chair on the deck where he could be watched. The drop off of the deck was a good thirty feet straight down and there was some concern that the bird would try to fly, fail, and then fall to the ground. After about twenty minutes, during which the bird sat watching the humans watch him, Brian took a few cautious steps in his direction. The bird twice stretched its wings high over its head and then lifted up off the chair back, slowly flapping away amid much cheering and clapping from the human observers.

Although this incident had a happy ending, it made the participants wonder how we could make sportsmen more careful about retrieving their fishing tackle and also wonder how many birds not so lucky to land on a concerned woman's deck may have died from a similar entanglement.

JOINING THE VA-BIRD DISCUSSION LIST

Ruth Beck suggested that *The Flyer* editors might find useful information by joining an internet group that has been set up to share birding information among Virginia birders. Coincidentally, Bill Holcombe had signed up to become a participant just before leaving town for a week. Upon checking his e-mail after his return, he found at least a hundred messages describing various birdwatching outings plus a smattering of questions and answers. Wading through this pile of messages in hit or miss fashion, as there was not enough time to read them all, he encountered two messages of interest. One was from Ruth Beck answering a query regarding early sightings of hummingbirds and reporting an April 12 sighting. The other was a knowledgeable, rather forthright and refreshingly direct answer to birders with purple martin houses on how to deal with the problem of starling invaders. Here is the

answer:

*Protecting nesting martins from
starling invaders:*

“Starlings are the biggest enemy the martins (as well as other native cavity nesting birds) have. You must remove their nests daily, as the starlings will claim as many compartments as possible. Eliminating these pests is the only sure method of preventing their aggression.

Your martins arrived last season for the first time in early June. This is not unusual for first-time martins. In my experience the starling problem is easing by this time. The martins will probably arrive several weeks earlier this year and the males will have molted into their adult plumage. As your colony ages the adults will arrive more toward the early date for first arrivals in your area.

You can keep most of the holes covered until you see that your birds are back, but it is time for you to open at least some of the compartments. There is a lot of research being done with starling resistance entrance holes (SREH) This would be something to try but it takes time to get the martins used to them. My birds are now accepting them after three years of not using them on one house. I use lots of natural gourds that I hang from the houses and from special gourd racks. The swinging or rocking motion of the gourds deters starlings as well.

Keep fighting and don't be afraid to declare war on these “rats of the sky.” I lost twenty eggs and an adult female martin in one attack by a starling last year. They are a real menace.”

T.A., Abingdon, Va.

GREAT DISMAL SWAMP TRIP

On April 22 Don Schwab, State Biologist for the Great Dismal Swamp, led this trip on a dark and overcast day with temperatures in the low 50's. It even sprinkled a couple of times after the group left Williamsburg. Despite the unpromising weather, 40 species including 13 warblers, were identified. The **prothonotary** that Alex had promised was there, along with these warblers: **blue-winged, northern parula, pine, prairie, black and white, worm eating, ovenbird, hooded, Louisiana water thrush, and common**

yellowthroat. The **Swainson's**, again, was heard but not seen. Other notables included Baltimore oriole, red-headed woodpecker and a whole flock of cedar waxwings.

This trip was enjoyed by Ron and Bobby Giese, Phyllis Johnson, Alex and Mike Minarik, Randy and Jandy Strickland with Randy's parents, Jo and Stick.

MAY BIRD WALK AT YORK RIVER STATE PARK

Alex Minarik has arranged for Tom Armour to lead this trip to York River State Park on May 20. While no one can make any promises, its timing should be just right for a good display of tropical migrants. Last year at this time the group found 52 species, including several woodland migrants.

The park gates open at 8:00 a.m. and participants should drive on through to the parking area adjacent to the headquarters building as soon after the opening as possible.

FOLLOWING THE MONARCH OF MEXICO

Julie and Ty Hotchkiss followed the Monarch Butterfly to its winter home in Mexico and this is their story of that adventure.

Thousands of monarch butterflies in the air, covering the trees, and lining the trail is a sight you will never forget. The Monarch Butterfly Sanctuary, where millions of them spend the winter, is about a hundred miles west of Mexico City. They were here long before the Mayans, Aztecs or Spanish, so they can truly be called the Monarch of Mexico. The refuge is open to the public and visitation is encouraged as it brings money to the people from entrance fees and benefits nearby shops selling everything from pottery to blouses, including jewelry, hats, rugs, and souvenirs of all sizes and shapes. This benefits the economy so the villagers want to help protect the huge Oyamel trees upon which the butterflies are dependent. The heavy growth insulates them from freezing temperatures as they huddle together in the evergreen branches for warmth. During extremely cold weather they go

into a state of semi-hibernation. The only thing that they need is moisture from nearby little puddles and streams.

These trees grow best at an altitude of between 9,500 and 11,500 feet. It seems strange that the butterflies would fly so far to winter in the mountains but the theory is that this migration pattern evolved millions of years ago when the climate was different. The imprint of this need to fly south is so ingrained that monarchs from as far north as Canada make the long journey. We were in Toronto in the 1960's when they were just beginning to band butterflies and to track their migration, but it wasn't until 1978 that the sanctuaries in Mexico were discovered. Local people knew about them but the rest of the world was unaware of the wintering home of these fragile flying flowers. One individual was recorded as flying 1,800 miles from where it was first tagged. They fly from 7 to 12 miles per hour and may cover 50 miles in a day, which means that a large part of their life span is spent in migration. The first generation that heads north doesn't make it all the way as the males die after mating in Mexico and the females lay eggs before reaching the northern destination of their flight. These eggs hatch and the caterpillars crawl out to begin eating. Within two weeks they form a chrysalis and an adult butterfly will emerge to begin a new life cycle.

The sanctuary is one of five that has been set aside by the Mexican government but there are eleven other sites that need protection as well. These eleven are the places where poor farmers want to cut down the trees to sell and to clear the land for farming. We need to make certain that something is done to help these other areas. Over 200 million monarch butterflies migrate to Mexico in the winter and are dependent on the protection of their wintering areas.

Monarchs also need help in this country and we can all play a part. Milkweed plants are essential to their existence as they lay their eggs on the leaves. The milkweed leaves makes the butterflies taste bad and can be poisonous to some predators. So most birds avoid them. A number of varieties of milkweed are available. Try planting some of them in your garden and you will be able to observe the life cycle as the monarchs lay their

eggs that become caterpillars, that form chrysalis, that produce beautiful monarch butterflies to fly around your garden. You can also grow colorful flowers like lavender, asters, verbena, lantana, and the butterfly bush to entice them to stay in your yard. It also helps to have a place where they can get water. The monarchs truly represent flying flowers that we all can enjoy.

Some Monarchs winter near Monterrey, California and a few stay in Florida, but the vast majority go to Mexico. We made the trip with Viva Mexico which offers a six-day trip for a very reasonable price, from McAllen, Texas. It is helpful to go with a partner as the final few miles of the road are very rough and you go by truck. You will want some good walking shoes or boots to hike the trails in the refuge, as you will want to be able to climb as high as possible. When we went, early March, the butterflies were actually quite low on the mountain. They were also more active, so this can be an ideal time to visit the sanctuary. The butterflies return to Mexico about November 1. This coincides with the Mexican religious festival "The day of the Dead," when everyone takes flowers to the cemetery as we do on Memorial Day. Because this is also when the butterflies arrive, the Mexicans say that these are the souls of their loved ones returning to visit their families.

This is one of the most amazing trips that you can take and the sight of millions of monarchs filling the sky is one of the marvels of Mexico.

You can reach Viva Mexico at 1-(956) 631-5971.

BIRD OF THE MONTH

Orchard Oriole by Bill Holcombe

The orioles belong to the Troupial family of birds which includes the surprising mix of grackles, cowbirds, bobolinks and black birds, as well as orioles. This is a Western Hemisphere family that includes 91 species, 22 of which are North American. There are ten orioles found in the United States and only two of these are eastern birds, the Baltimore and the orchard orioles. The Baltimore oriole is the dominant eastern bird and its range extends to the western prairies where it frequently interbreeds with its western counterpart, the Bullock's oriole. Others of the brightly colored remaining group are found in Mexico,

Arizona and California.

The orchard oriole is by far the most common of this group in the south eastern part of the U.S. While each spring a few Baltimore orioles are spotted in our area, the orchard oriole probably nests here and is quite common in the Hog Island area from April 20 until October 20. This is "our" oriole. While not as brilliant as the Baltimore or its western cousins the orchard oriole is quite an attractive bird. At six to seven inches in length it is about an inch shorter than the Baltimore. Its black head, throat, back and wings with a single wing bar are similar but its chest and under parts are a rich chestnut. Its tail is solid black, whereas the Baltimore's brilliant orange continues to the underside tip of the tail. The female is dull greenish above and pale yellow below with two distinct wing bars. The immature males are similar with a solid black throat.

The bird's nesting area covers a wide area starting in northern Florida north to New Jersey and lower Connecticut. The Northern boundary cuts through Michigan, Illinois and Minnesota to the Dakotas. The southern boundary runs along the Gulf coast to western Texas. It winters in southern Mexico to northern South America, with a few accidentals in California. It is found in rural areas around farms, orchards, fields and small towns and in wooded areas along stream and ponds. It is not an especially shy bird and is easily seen on the inner paths at Hog Island. Ninety percent of its food consists of insects that man wants to be rid of, beetles, ants, crickets, grasshoppers, boll weevils, cankerworms etc. It also eats berries, grapes and figs.

The northern migration arrives in the United States from Mexico in the March-April time frame. It moves up the Mississippi valley where the bird is far more numerous than in the Atlantic states. During courtship the male has a flight song which he sings while flying high above the tree-tops. While these birds sometimes nest in loose colonies, single nests are common. The nest is beautifully woven of grass strips into an open pouch. The pouch is about as deep as it is wide and is attached to a forked limb. The walls of the pouch are quite thin but are still strong enough to withstand spring and summer storms. The bottom is thickly wadded with plant down. Male and

female work on the construction of the nest but incubation of four to five eggs laid in that nest is done solely by the female. Eggs are laid April through July. Incubation is about 14 days and the young fledge in about another two weeks. The male assists in the feeding of the young. Unfortunately the nest is a frequent target of the brown-headed cowbird. Banded adults have been found to live about seven years.

If you would like to see one of these birds, there is a good chance that if you go to Hog Island and walk for ten minutes down the first trail on your right you will have success. Hat, long sleeves and plenty of bug dope are recommended for walking there.

References: The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds and The Roger Tory Peterson Field Guide to the Birds East of the Rockies.