



THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

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COME BIRD THE BAY-BRIDGE TUNNEL ISLANDS

Field trip Coordinator Alex Minarik has arranged a January field trip that will take us under Tom Armour's leadership, to the Bay-Bridge Tunnel islands. Wintering sea birds can be expected and may include northern gannets, great cormorants, all three scoters (black, surf, and white-winged) and some or all of these ducks: oldsquaw, harlequin, common eider and king eider. There are also shore birds such as the purple sandpiper that may appear, plus stray late migrants. All appear at one time or other during the winter months. At the same time, it is not impossible for some fairly rare sea birds to show up. The worse the weather the more likely that strangers will appear!

We will leave the Colony Square Shipping Center on Jamestown Road (home of Fresh Market and the Polo Club) at 7:00 AM, after consolidating cars. Remember that there is a fee of \$10 per car to cross to the islands and return. We do not plan to continue across the entire bridge, which would then require another \$10 for the return trip. There are rest room facilities on one of the islands. You may want to bring along a lunch. Predicting the weather is difficult but if it is cold here it will be windier and colder there.

DUES TIME AGAIN

Please return a check in the enclosed envelope to Chuck Rend, our treasurer. Dues are unchanged from last year: i.e., \$10 per individual, \$15 for families, \$3 for students and \$25 for patron memberships. We're now up to 40 patron members from 25 in 1998. We thank these people for their generosity.

NEXT MEETING

The Williamsburg Bird Club officially enters the new millennium and the new century on Wednesday, January 19, at 7:30 PM in Room 117 of Millington Hall, William and Mary. Program Director Dan Cristal has arranged for David Whitehurst to describe the developing plans for The Virginia Birding Trail for us, and to get our membership's reaction to those plans. We briefly described in a recent *Flyer* Virginia's interest in emulating a program undertaken in Texas that has been deemed a great success. Virginia has engaged the firm that did that work in Texas to explore possibilities of repeating it here. Mr. Whitehurst is Director of the Wildlife Diversity Division, Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries.

MESSAGE FROM RUTH BECK OUR NEW PRESIDENT

I am very pleased to be truly "back" with the club after my stint with the VSO and a year of sabbatical. The Bird Club has held a very special place in my mind and heart for what is now a very long time. I truly appreciate my birding friends who understand me quite well and enjoy working with me anyway. And I look forward to returning to old haunts and familiar activities with all of you and perhaps even trying some new trails.

I appreciate the hard work and cooperation that I've always enjoyed from the officers and members of this club and have always said that they make another term as president the easiest job in the club. I look forward to this New Everything year of continuing to do all of those things that we've been doing so well, and maybe adding

to them. To do that we need to hear from all of you about directions that you would like to take and any changes that you would like to see us try. My ears are always open and your phone calls are invited, or you can write to Bill Holcombe or Phil Young to try your ideas in *The Flyer*. See you all on January 19!

NEED FOR COOKIES AND SODAS

The social time at the end of the meetings seems to have become a well-accepted feature of those meetings. However, it requires a steady parade of cookie and drink suppliers. If you are willing to help, will you please call? As it's not yet clear now who is chairing that activity in this new year, you can give Bill Holcombe the information at 229-8057. He'll pass it along.

GREAT BACKYARD BIRD COUNT

The dates for this second Bird Count have been set for February 18 & 21. While the announcement did not include all of the particulars, the general ground rules are very likely similar to those of last year.

You count and report each day separately.

You count species and the largest number seen at *one time*.

The count area is your yard and adjoining neighborhood.

You report on the Internet to <http://birdsource.org/gbbc>. Bill Holcombe or Wild Birds Unlimited will send this in for you if that is easier. It's so simple to do that it would be great to see 100 percent of our members reporting.

100TH CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

Twenty six birders took to the field on December 19 for the Williamsburg Christmas Bird Count. It celebrated the Audubon Society's 100th sponsorship of this annual event. They walked 22 miles and drove 253 miles to cover nine different territories and identified 100 species of birds (see attached list.) Most were in the field by 7 AM and it was a weary group that met at the conference room in the William and Mary Biology Depart-

ment at five in the afternoon to tabulate the results of the day's work.

It was a dark and windy day and all were thankful that the rain held off. Most felt that the wind had a negative effect on the count. Birds were hunkered into thickets and water birds tended to hug wind-breaking shores. That did not mean that we didn't all enjoy the special ambience of this event but it turned out that the count of only 100 species was below the club average of 108 and behind last year's 110. Three species seen during the count week, but not seen on that Sunday, would be reasonably expected to appear: lesser yellowlegs, rusty blackbird and purple finch. ("Count Week" birds are a separate statistic requested by Audubon.) Other species among the "missing" which are usually included are northern pintail, wild turkey and bobwhite. The numbers of birds seen within a species were also down.

Birds reported in only one of the nine count areas included: common loon (Cheatham Annex), great egret (Hog Island), northern shoveler (Hog Island), common goldeneye (Cheatham Annex), clapper rail (Jamestown Island), eastern screech owl (Cheatham Annex), barred owl (College Woods), fish crow (Cheatham Annex), red-breasted nuthatch (College Woods), house wren (Cheatham Annex), palm warbler (Hog Island), orange-crowned warbler (Cheatham Annex), black and white warbler (Jamestown Island.)

On the other hand, the following birds were seen in at least eight out of the nine count areas: double-crested cormorant, great blue heron, Canada goose, mallard, turkey vulture, bald eagle, ring-billed gull, mourning dove, belted kingfisher, red-bellied woodpecker, northern flicker, bluejay, American crow, Carolina chickadee, tufted titmouse, white-breasted nuthatch, Carolina wren, ruby-crowned kinglet, eastern bluebird, northern mockingbird, starling, yellow-rumped warbler, northern cardinal, song sparrow, white-throated sparrow, dark-eyed junco, red-winged blackbird, house finch and goldfinch.

We owe a "thank you" bow to Grace and Joe Doyle for their long time efforts with bluebird boxes at Camp Peary, our present trail workers, Shirley Devan and Dorothy Whitfield, and all of the folks in between who worked those trails for the widespread presence of blue birds in all nine

areas. Finding ruby-crowned kinglets in all nine areas was a pleasant surprise and we can all be thankful for the bald eagle's appearance throughout our area — hard to imagine that just a few years back!

Our two true surprises were the orange-crowned warbler found at Cheatham Annex and the black and white warbler found at Jamestown Island.

Participating birders were: Tom Armour, Hugh Beard, Ruth Beck, Christine Buzz, Dan Cristol, Grace and Joe Doyle, Gary Driscoll, Bettye Fields, Adrienne Frank, Jane Frigo, Bill Holcombe, Julie Hotchkiss, A.C. Kaye, Paul and Carol McAllister, Sandra Peterson, Mary Pulley, Lee Schuster, David Shantz, Dot Silsby, Randy and Jandy Strickland, Brian Taber, Magill Weber, Bill Williams and Marilyn Zeigler.

The participants in this event take such pleasure and satisfaction out of doing it that it is a mystery why our club only supplies about twenty birders for this special annual day. The others are long time participants from the Newport News Bird Club, two of whom lead the count in their areas. Another, Mary Pulley, has missed only one of the Williamsburg Counts in the past 23 years.

Report from Lake Vermilion, Minnesota

Elizabeth and Walter Kurth, neighbors of the Armours, are "bird people" who spend summers on Lake Vermilion, near the Canadian border in Minnesota. Walter sent me a letter containing some observations about the natural life there that I found quite interesting. I thought that you would, too. Along with my "interest" I found envy creeping into my system. Ed.

Walter describes Lake Vermilion as having 1200 miles of shore line and 365 islands, one of which has 120 acres. It is owned by five families, the Kurths among them.

"The island's been a special legacy for five generations blessed by our Creator with pristine beauty which we've taken every effort to maintain and perpetuate," says Walter. One of those actions has been to participate in the annual loon survey for the past fifteen years. The number of loons grew steadily to a peak of 331 in 1993. Then it declined

gradually until 1999, when it rose to 258. Paralleling those figures is the chick count that likewise peaked in '93 at 49, gradually declined, and then bounced up in last summer's count to 39.

Along with the recent loon population loss has been a growing bald eagle population. Walter believes that is having an adverse effect on the loons. "This summer a bald eagle was seen killing a nesting loon which refused to leave the eggs. Its mate tried to draw off the eagle to no avail. There are almost too many eagles now and it seems perhaps this was a territorial thing. Loons had nested there the year before and survived, although their eggs did not. We thought that the minks had gotten them but maybe it was the eagles. The eagles have also driven away some of the osprey."

He reports that the reintroduction of wolves in the area has gone quite well, although some folks have a concern for the safety of family and pets in the area. A friend who was fishing on the lake saw a wolf take down a deer in shallow water on the lake edge.

Migrating warblers pass through the islands in large numbers on their way to and from Canada. In the fall Hawk Mountain near Duluth, Minnesota, "is awesome." And here is a tip for Bill Williams and Brian Taber: The hawks are trapped and banded there just as they are at Kiptopeke, but then they become part of a fund raiser. For a \$10 donation you can hold a trapped hawk in your hands for a few moments before tossing it into the air!

This year the Kurths will visit the island during the winter months when temperatures can get as low as 63 below zero. Of course, the other side of that coin is that summer temperatures above the 80's are very rare.

Did anyone else feel a touch of envy of the folks who own a piece of such a wonderful world?

BIRD OF THE MONTH

The Willet by Bill Holcombe

Birders who also love their beach time must have a special place in their hearts for the willet. I do and was reminded of this on a gorgeous beach day on the North Carolina Outer banks on New Year's

Day. As ring-billed gulls kept up a constant jockeying for pecking order position along the surf line, the willets looked much more mature and self possessed as they stalked the sandy wash, occasionally stabbing at bits of food with bills almost three inches long.

Mid-winter, these 14-inch tall birds have bodies of a rather uniform soft gray with lighter under parts. They stand on legs about seven inches long. The legs are bluish gray and the bill is a darker blackish gray. Breeding plumage shows a more finely speckled breast and under parts. The back is darker and flecked with tones of brown and black. The two unmistakable field marks are the large, sharply contrasting black and white patterns on the wings in flight and the distinctive cry which is the source of its name, "Willittttt." And all of this reminds me of the day at Craney Island in August when ten of us took fifteen minutes to figure out that the strange gray bird staring at us was a willet that had already changed color!

While we know them as a shore birds, willets also nest inland from the southwestern provinces of Canada south to northeastern California Nevada and into the Dakotas. There it may nest far from any significant body of water in nests ranging from scratched cups in sandy soil to woven nests in high grass. While these birds winter along the Pacific coast of California and Mexico and into the western Gulf coast, some cross the country and join the eastern branch from the Carolinas on the Atlantic coast down through the eastern Gulf coast. The eastern willets nest all along the Atlantic Coast from Nova Scotia south and winter in the southern ranges into the West Indies. During a period when the bird was heavily shot for market, up through the 1920s, it virtually disappeared north of Virginia. In 1966 three pairs were found nesting near Jones beach and were the first confirmed return of the bird to New York State. In 1971 a nest found in York County, Maine was the first recorded in New England in almost 100 years. (Birds can sometimes undo the harm that we humans create.)

Willetts are usually on their nesting grounds by May. They are not particularly shy and will hover on quivering wings, scolding intruders. Terres refers to courtship ceremonies involving the flashing of the black and white wings, but does

not describe it further. He does note the specialized behavior associated with exchanging incubation duties. The approaching male bird makes a deep bow to the female before settling onto the eggs. Mated pairs have a particular vocalization which may even include melodic whistling. The eastern willets are semi-colonial nesters and prefer high ground on Atlantic offshore islands but will also nest on the edge of dunes and under shrubs in brushy land near the edge of salt marshes. These nests also vary from sandy depressions to intricately woven nests of grass and weeds. In April or May four olive eggs with brown blotches are laid and incubated for about 22 days. There are no good records on the time to flight from the nests, but I have noticed doing these stories that it is usually similar to incubation period or just slightly longer.

The eastern birds are wading birds while feeding but will readily swim when there is a reason to do so. It is believed that they alight on the ocean when migrating. Food consists of aquatic insects, marine worms, small crabs, mollusks and small fishes. They also eat some grass and small shoots.

Our willet seems to be not only a pleasant and cheery sight along the beach but to have a rather civilized life style!

Reference: The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds by John Terres.

Williamsburg Christmas Count List - 1999

MP = Middle Plantation SK = Skimino CP=Camp Peary CA= Cheatham Annex HI = Hog Island
 CW=College Woods KM= Kingsmill JI =Jamestown Island JP = Jolly Pond

	MP	SK	CP	CA	HI	CW	KM	JI	JP
Common Loon	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	0	0
Pied-billed Grebe	1	3	5	7	2	1	4	0	6
Horned Grebe	0	0	0	33	0	0	1	0	0
Double-crested Cormorant	121	8	8	122	411	2	125	62	1
Great Blue heron	11	2	13	4	17	0	8	12	3
Great Egret	0	0	0	0	14	0	0	0	0
Tundra Swan	0	0	18	4	33	0	0	0	0
Mute Swan	9	0	2	4	0	0	4	0	0
Canada Goose	223	20	40	18	1,045	0	181	35	6
Wood Duck	0	0	4	1	2	0	6	0	0
Green-winged Teal	1	0	0	0	11	0	0	0	12
American Black Duck	0	0	0	3	12	0	0	10	45
Mallard	47	13	13	26	15	10	35	10	64
Northern Shoveler	0	0	0	0	10	0	0	0	0
Gadwall	0	18	4	0	2	22	0	0	0
American Widgeon	0	0	0	12	11	1	0	8	0
Canvasback	0	0	570	2,562	0	0	0	0	0
Ring-necked Duck	0	3	170	214	112	0	5	73	245
Common Goldeneye	0	0	0	7	0	0	0	0	0
Bufflehead	0	16	14	127	9	0	0	0	0
Hooded Merganser	2	8	55	7	4	0	42	0	0
Red-breasted Merganser	13	0	0	0	21	0	42	0	0
Ruddy Duck	0	53	86	3,256	7	0	0	0	1
Black Vulture	4	4	0	0	1	6	6	3	4
Turkey Vulture	39	38	19	3	13	15	12	8	30
Bald Eagle (adult)	2	2	6	1	3	0	1	5	3
Bald Eagle (immature)	2	0	2	1	1	0	1	6	0
Northern Harrier	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
Sharp-shinned Hawk	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
Cooper's Hawk	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	0
Red-shouldered Hawk	1	2	0	0	0	0	1	1	1
Red-tailed Hawk	2	0	8	0	1	2	1	1	0
American Kestrel	0	1	1	1	2	0	0	3	1
Clapper Rail	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
American Coot	0	0	8	0	37	0	0	0	0
Killdeer	0	0	9	0	0	0	0	72	0
American Woodcock	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	0
Laughing Gull	0	0	1	42	18	0	225	0	0
Bonaparte's Gull	0	0	0	22	71	0	0	2	0
Ring-billed Gull	94	17	1	47	374	20	11	111	0

Herring Gull	2	20	0	70	32	5	13	1	0
Greater Black-backed Gull	5	0	0	9	19	0	57	15	2
Forster's Tern	0	0	0	22	48	0	9	0	0
Rock Dove	0	1	0	39	25	15	5	6	0
Mourning Dove	1	15	21	2	0	2	24	11	51
Eastern Screech Owl	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	0	0
Great Horned Owl	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	0
Barred Owl	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Belted Kingfisher	5	3	2	3	1	0	2	4	1
Red-headed Woodpecker	4	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Red-bellied Woodpecker	17	4	8	11	4	0	12	4	7
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	1	0	2	1	0	2	2	1	2
Downy Woodpecker	4	1	5	6	2	9	4	2	8
Hairy Woodpecker	1	0	0	1	1	4	0	0	0
Northern Flicker	16	1	2	4	4	12	9	7	3
Pileated Woodpecker	4	0	1	3	2	3	3	0	3
Eastern phoebe	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Blue Jay	7	6	11	5	0	7	10	9	5
American Crow	17	34	34	20	3	16	33	27	10
Fish Crow	0	0	0	9	0	0	0	0	0
Carolina Chickadee	12	7	17	9	5	37	33	14	22
Tufted Titmouse	6	0	3	3	4	14	11	7	12
White-breasted Nuthatch	4	5	5	5	0	6	10	3	10
Brown-headed Nuthatch	0	0	0	3	14	0	2	0	0
Brown Creeper	1	2	0	3	0	1	3	0	0
Carolina Wren	6	11	7	20	16	19	26	13	6
House Wren	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
Winter Wren	2	0	0	5	0	3	1	0	0
Golden-crowned Kinglet	3	15	0	6	9	10	1	0	3
Ruby-crowned Kinglet	7	2	4	15	14	14	3	2	5
Eastern Bluebird	30	13	19	14	6	8	14	32	6
Hermit Thrush	2	0	0	3	0	2	1	0	1
American Robin	1	1	0	0	0	5	35	32	75
Gray Catbird	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Northern Mockingbird	0	4	2	2	2	4	4	3	1
Brown Thrasher	0	1	0	1	0	5	0	2	0
Cedar Waxwing	1	1	0	0	1	75	13	107	0
Starling	22	57	9	69	21	71	182	120	3
Orange-crowned Warbler	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Yellow-rumped Warbler	35	9	12	38	41	4	90	214	3
Pine warbler	0	0	1	2	5	0	0	0	0
Palm Warbler	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Black and White Warbler	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Northern Cardinal	2	17	27	17	16	7	26	42	27
Rufous-sided Towhee	1	0	6	4	7	0	4	5	0
Chipping Sparrow	0	0	4	1	0	1	0	0	0
Field Sparrow	0	0	0	6	26	1	0	2	0

Savannah Sparrow	0	0	0	0	27	0	0	0	12
Fox Sparrow	0	0	3	1	3	8	0	0	0
Song Sparrow	2	1	13	14	318	2	8	7	16
Swamp Sparrow	0	0	0	2	41	0	0	0	0
White-throated sparrow	15	82	48	49	121	150	102	38	104
Dark-eyed Junco	31	145	96	61	8	61	83	19	100
Red-winged Blackbird	236	115	4	23	52	65	45	172	0
Eastern Meadowlark	0	3	1	0	8	0	0	0	0
Common Grackle 1	0	80	0	9,8001		3	0	20	46
Brown-headed Cowbird	0	19	3	0	2	0	0	5	0
House Finch	2	12	2	9	0	5	29	37	3
Goldfinch	27	42	6	20	8	13	38	3	1
House Sparrow	0	12	3	7	0	1	2	4	0