



THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

Volume 24, Number 3

March 2000

NEXT MEETING

The next meeting of the Williamsburg Bird Club will be held in Room 117, Millington Hall on the campus of William and Mary. Dan Cristol has arranged for Magill Weber, a graduate biology student, to present a program "Reintroducing Sea Birds onto Islands Off the Coast of Maine" Dan says that this presentation will be illustrated with wonderful pictures of many sea birds, including spectacular ones of puffins.

MEMORIES OF BILL SHEEHAN

When Bill Sheehan passed away on January 19 of this year, a whole bunch of really good things stopped that had been going on for a very long time in the Williamsburg Bird Club. Who did you call when you saw a notable bird? Bill Sheehan... Who kept track of all of those calls and the Christmas Count and Spring Count sightings? Bill Sheehan... Where could you find local bird information going back to the start of the club? At Bill Sheehan's. (A notable fact about Bill's superlative record keeping is that there is never a mention of starlings or English sparrows, which he had personally eliminated from American bird life as "foreign escapees")... Where could you take your monthly field trip group, if it rained? Bill Sheehan's kitchen... Where did the William and Mary student field trips wind up when the weather turned bad? Bill Sheehan's kitchen... If you've been unsuccessful in spotting one of your favorite birds such as a yellow-bellied sapsucker, a brown creeper, a rufous-sided towhee, a house wren, a ruby-crowned kinglet, a red-breasted nuthatch (some years), a brown thrasher or a handful of others, where could you be almost

certain of finding them? Bill Sheehan's back yard viewed from the kitchen... Who would get the *Flyer* editors back on track when they got a trifle lazy or sloppy? Bill Sheehan, with some acerbic comments followed by a cup of coffee or a little bourbon, depending upon the time of day. But he was always quick with an approving comment when it was deserved.

This intelligent, generous, very well informed man with a very kind heart sometimes talked like a whale boat coxswain to hide all of that. He has been so much a part of birding in the Williamsburg area that it is difficult to picture just how that world will carry on without him. Will the squirrels regain control of his backyard? According to Bill's sons, who shared this story with us, the squirrels have already started getting their revenge. When sons, Patrick, Thomas and Michael left Bill's house after several days of packing up, they shut off the gas fireplace logs that burned most of the winter and locked up the house. Returning for more packing later on, they opened the front door and heard strange noises in the living room. It turned out that a squirrel had come down the chimney, couldn't find his way out and had torn up curtains and furniture in his efforts to escape! "We think that he was getting his revenge!" was son Michael's guess. For those who don't understand this "revenge" they should know that Bill, who never did anything half way, hated the squirrels' intrusion into his backyard bird sanctuary with a real passion.

Michael also told me that Bill started birding as a boy in Connecticut. On a bird outing there in the late twenties or early thirties, he ran into a young Roger Tory Peterson who urged him to look for his new book that would soon come out. That book was Peterson's first Field Guide.

Among us Williamsburgers, Tom Armour undoubtedly had the closest association with Bill, whom he "talked with most days for the past twenty years." They made quite a birding team with Bill's great ears and Tom's great eyes. One of their favorite spots was Hog Island where they established a special relationship with Tony Castello, the resident Ranger. In recent years when Bill's walking ability was limited Tony let them drive just about anywhere in the preserve. And they helped Tony with his bird identification program.

Joy Archer, who frequently birded with Bill said that his passing leaves a great big void. "He made everything fun in his own personal mix of irreverence, warmth, humor and intelligence."

Ruth Beck was a long time friend and admirer. Asked if she had special memories, she quickly said, "He never forgot that Ground Hog Day was a very special day for me and I always got a call or a note. And he had a marvelous way of saying, if you were sort of down or maybe if he was sort of down, 'It's amazing but spring always comes and the birds always come back!' He was a very kind and thoughtful man and you always felt good after visiting with him."

Friend and neighbor Brian Taber said, "The day that I was on the Parkway right after the (recent) snowstorm and found all of those great birds, my first thought was, "Wait 'til I tell Bill"...but the days of "telling Bill" were over. He and Bill teased each other for years over who stole the red-breasted nuthatch. One or other of them usually saw one at his winter feeder, but never during the same year.

Julie Hotchkiss remembers being very impressed with Bill when she attended a gardening symposium here before eventually moving to Williamsburg. Bill was a speaker. He led bird walks for the Williamsburg Garden Club. "He was a great person and a great birder and I'm afraid that we are all going to miss him very much."

Here are some facts about Bill: He was 83, a retired Captain in the U.S. Navy, where he served for 33 years starting in 1941 and saw service in the Pacific theater during WW II. His last assignment was commanding officer of Cheatham Annex. Bill and his wife Marge had three sons, Patrick, Thomas and Michael, and four grand-

children. Marge died several years ago.

Bill was a charter member of the Williamsburg Bird Club, its first secretary and keeper of the records from day one. Those records permitted the Club to publish its Annotated List of Williamsburg Birds two years ago.

A grave side service with military honors will be held at 9 a.m., Friday March 24 at Arlington National Cemetery. (Note that the newspaper time of 2 p.m. was in error.)

The Bird Club officers have been discussing an appropriate memorial to Bill in keeping with his long association with the Club and his major contributions to it. As soon as we have a definite plan we will be in touch with the membership.

FIELD NOTES FOR FEBRUARY

Until we get a new system worked out I'd appreciate it if members with birds to report would give me a call or leave the information on my machine. Bill Holcombe, 229-8057

Waterfowl Survey

The Vineyards Pond has hosted **ringnecks**, **black ducks** and at least one **American wigeon**...Lake Matoka supported **pied-billed grebes**, **green-winged teal**, **black ducks**, **gadwall** and **ring-necked ducks**...A typical trip along the **York River** produced occasional small rafts of **ruddy ducks** all the way from Felsgate Creek to the Weapons Station, and in smaller numbers near the ruddies were groups of **lesser scaup**. In small numbers all the way to Yorktown were **buffle-heads**, with an occasional **golden eye** and an **occasional red-breasted merganser**. At Indian Field Creek there were **ring necks**, a few **hooded mergansers** and a large number of **tundra swans** far to the rear of the impoundment. Off the Yorktown beach were **common loons**. One day there were seven of them, two feeding almost on the beach. Julie Hotchkiss's February field trip found **horned grebes** on the river. Joe Doyle's report from Camp Peary included **canvasback** and **American widgeon**...Across the James at Sunken Meadows were hundreds of **gadwall** with a few **American widgeon** interspersed and large numbers of **tundra swans** looking elegant and regal...Maybe no day is typical at Hog Island but

at mid-month there were a few **black ducks**, a large bunch of **lesser scaup** in the second pond on the right and a small number of **ring-necks** in the next pond. The last pond on the left held **buffle-heads**, a pair of **golden-eye**, and a pair of **red-breasted mergansers**. A **coot** was seen bobbing around the Scotland Ferry entrance. **Mallards** were common everywhere except the York River.

Other reports:

Ruth Beck came up with an early **osprey** from Barhamsville February 26 and Joe Doyle had one the next day at Kingsmill. Ruth also reported a large flock of **cedar wax wings** just in time to be included in the Back Yard Bird Count. She also says **phoebes** are back on the campus and refurbishing their nest at her house...Forest Fenstermaker had a **tree swallow** when he was looking over the new Ford's Colony nature trail in early March...Alex and Mike Minarik have had a family of **wild turkeys** moving in and out of their yard for several weeks, roosting in their trees and fleeing from their new nine week old yellow lab puppy...Lee Schuster has had four to six **purple finches** around her feeders with great regularity over the last half of February and continuing into March...Brian Taber started his migrating hawk watch February 10 and saw roughly 200 birds pass over by March 6. Two thirds were **turkey vultures** and the rest included **northern harriers**, **sharp-shins**, **kestrel**, **red-tailed** and **red-shouldered hawks**, **bald eagles** and **black vulture**. Most recently his signs of spring migration included **fish crows**, **tree swallows** and **great egrets**. Hawks became active around Graylin Woods mid month and all in one morning a pair of **red-tailed**, a pair of **red-shouldered** and a single **sharp-shinned** were seen in back of Bill Holcombe's house. He also had a visit from a **hairy woodpecker**...Marilyn Zeigler thought that the **fox sparrows** that had been scratching under her bird feeders had left, until she found them rooting around more secretively under the back bushes. Brian Taber continued to see **fox sparrows** in his yard...Late February a group of seven **bald eagles** appeared, soaring over Lake Matoka.

Joe Doyle's Camp Peary Report

Pied-billed grebe, horned grebe, tundra swan, mute swan, gadwall, American widgeon, canvas-back, ring-necked duck, greater scaup, lesser scaup, common goldeneye, bufflehead, hooded merganser, red-breasted merganser, ruddy duck, bald eagle, kestrel, bobwhite, killdeer, common tern, belted kingfisher, redheaded woodpecker, hermit thrush, brown thrasher, pine warbler, rufous-sided towhee.

FEBRUARY FIELD TRIP

Alex Minarik arranged for Julie Hotchkiss to lead a trip through the Greensprings Nature Trail in back of the high school with a 7:30 meeting time. Unfortunately many of us got up at 6 o'clock, saw the steady rain and went back to bed. So much for the faint hearted. A strong-hearted threesome of Julie, Tom Armour and Marilyn Zeigler persisted and had a very good birding day. The rain had almost stopped by 7:30 and this valiant group entered the trail, found savannah sparrows, swamp sparrows and some cedar waxwings.

Then, deciding that the trail was just too wet to continue, they shifted over to the Colonial Parkway by the James and followed it all of the way to Yorktown. They counted 45 species for the day. These included common loons, horned grebe, tundra swans, lesser scaup, bufflehead, ruddy ducks and common goldeneye on the York. Along the James they found mute swan, wood duck, green-winged teal, hooded merganser, red-breasted merganser and ruddy ducks. They also picked up red-headed woodpecker, brown thrasher, cedar waxwing and a bunch of resident birds. I think that the moral of this story is that you don't give up on a field trip until the leader says, "Go home!"

A TRIP TO THE VINEYARDS IN MARCH

Alex Minarik has arranged for Randy and April Coleman to show us the birds of the Vineyards on the, Saturday, March 18th field trip. The varied habitat of ponds, marsh, woodlands and open fields offers a variety of bird life for very little effort. We will meet in the Vineyards Club house

parking lot at 7:30. You will find that by heading east on route 199 and turning right at the first traffic light past Jamestown Road. Take the first left onto Lake Powell Road. Stay on this until you reach the winery. The first exit is to the winery itself. Go past this to the next exit with the sign, "The Vineyards". Turn left, drive to the end of the entrance road and turn right. Stay on this road until you see a sign on the left, "Club House." We expect to complete the birding by 10:30.

The Dismal Swamp field trip is set for April 22, with Don Schwab. Be prepared for an early start at 6:30 a.m. A trip to York River State Park with Lee Schuster is scheduled for May 20, the height of the warbler migration.

GREAT BACK YARD BIRD COUNT

There is no way of knowing how many Club members participated in this four day event starting February 18. But we do know that a grand total of 62,508 checklists were filed through the internet web site, reporting 419 species and 4,770,222 birds. The breakdown of the report for Virginia tells us that the state had 125 species, but it does not tell us the number of participants. However, we can tell that there were more than 2,385, as that is how many reports included the mourning dove, the most frequently reported bird.

There were three concentrations of the numbers of participants and this generally followed the state's population, with masses of reports made around D.C., Richmond and the peninsula. We still don't know how Williamsburg fared in terms of participation but we do know that in terms of species reported, Williamsburg was 6th in the state with 83, in between Norfolk, number 5 with 89 species and Richmond, number 7 with 77. Oakton and Virginia Beach were tied at 106 species.

The ten most frequently reported birds in the state were the mourning dove, cardinal, Carolina chickadee, slate-colored junco, American crow, blue jay, house finch, goldfinch and downy woodpecker. The largest number of one species was the starling. Birds that we hope to see in the winter but usually can't find, must be more common in other parts of the state. There were 519 reports of purple finches, 149 fox sparrows, 125 brown creepers, 99 white crowned sparrows and 63

winter wrens.

Over the years these figures will hopefully take on some real importance but in the meantime those of us who participated had fun. I know that there were twenty some odd reports filed by club members and my guess is there were quite a few more than that.

A SPECIAL BALD EAGLE SHOW FOR WEB VIEWERS

(Release from Audubon)

People all over the country will be able to watch the development of two baby Bald Eagles, now five weeks old, through the joint efforts of several groups: the internet, the Audubon Society of Florida's Center for Birds of Prey and the Orlando Sentinel Newspaper. They joined together to keep this nest, 75 feet up in a tree at an undisclosed central Florida location, under camera surveillance from egg laying through fledging.

"With a video camera mounted on a tree above the nest and at a safe distance away from the eagles, we are able to witness this miracle of nature," said Reese Collins, director of the Audubon Society of Florida's Center for Birds of Prey, a recovery center for injured birds. The website of the Orlando Sentinel, <<http://www.orlandosentinel.com/projects/eagle>>, has hosted the video imaging of the eagles on the internet since they began nesting over a year ago.

The chicks will grow and develop during the next few months. Most of the time they are eating or sleeping but they also "play" with items that the parents have brought to the nest, such as plastic bottles, tennis balls and even sneakers. The young birds practice the grasping and squeezing techniques that they will need to become hunters.

Bald eagles grow faster than any other bird in North America. Weighing one-quarter pound at birth, they gain as much as six ounces a day. After reaching a weight of 10-12 pounds and having developed strong wings and legs, flight practice will begin. When they can fly they will leave the nest. In the meantime, however, there are threats to overcome. One eaglet may be killed by the larger of the two siblings. Parents have been known to kill their young if they detect a genetic

defect and storms can also take a toll.