



THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

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NEXT MEETING

Our next meeting will be on November 15 at 7:30 p.m. in Room 117 Millington Hall, William & Mary campus. Don West, a wildlife biologist with the Virginia Department of Transportation, will continue our mini-series on problems our birds face as they interact with mankind. He will address the issue of increased mortalities of birds feeding on ornamental shrubs planted in highway medians. It will include a recent study on that subject by Bryan Watts and the Center for Wildlife Conservation. For those who are tiring of gloom and doom, he will stress the many ways VDOT attempts to use the wildlife habitats under their control for habitat improvement.

OCTOBER FIELD TRIP — A “PERFECT TEN”

The October 21 trip to Jamestown Island was joined by ten members who were greeted by the sun and the loud, rash rattle of a belted kingfisher. We welcomed new members Meg and Allan Karb, Betty and Bill Caldwell and “old timers” Marilyn Lewis and Mack Lundy, Phyllis Jennings, Marilyn Zeigler, Joy Archer, and Ruth says, “We all had a heck of a good time!” Three cars wheeled into Jamestown Island and were surprised by the park ranger, who handed out the new Virginia quarters to all participants.

The birding began with a greater yellowlegs, three great blue herons, a few royal terns and three species of gulls. We combined walking and riding around the loop road to identify 29 species of birds.

The family picidae (pish-ih-dee), i.e., wood-

peckers, was well represented with seven species from the largest to the smallest: pileated (17"), flicker (13"), red bellied (9-1/2"), red-headed (9-1/4"), hairy (9"), yellow-bellied sapsucker (8-1/2") and the downey (6-1/2"). Thanks to Joy Archer, Phyllis Jennings and Mack Lundy for their sharp sightings.

We saw several flocks of migrating tree swallows overhead. An easter phoebe was still vocalizing with a sharp “peep” and a soft “fee-bee.” Those kinglets, ruby crowned and gold crowned, were seen and heard calling. Yellow-rumped warblers were “tcheck, tchecking” everywhere and we were delightfully greeted with the clear, “Oh, sweet, canada, canada, canada” of the white-throated sparrows. We also had a sharp shinned hawk fly by but no eagles were seen.

NOVEMBER FIELD TRIP

Alex Minarik will lead our next field trip to the York River on Saturday, November 18 to search out the fall ducks, grebes, swans and loons that may have arrived on the York River by then. Some early arrivals have already been reported. The group will gather at the Colony Shopping Center parking lot off Jamestown Road, home of the Fresh Market, at 7:15 a.m. and leave there at 7:30. On the way or way back from the river the group will check out the birding at College Park. The more scopes the better when working off the river bank, so please bring one along if you can.

After two years of coordinating these field trips Alex is taking a well-earned “sabbatical.” She certainly deserves a great big “Thank You” from club members for the dedicated and creative way she handled the job. She added the Great Dismal

Swamp, Newport News Park and a trip to the Bridge-Tunnel Islands to our list of birding places, to say nothing of the wonderful spring evening with the diving and soaring Woodcocks. A lot of participants added life-time birds on those trips. Alex, we are all grateful to you for those very good times.

OUR ELECTION DAY COMES NOVEMBER 15

The 2000 Nominating Committee of Marilyn Zeigler and Julie Hotchkiss have come up with an excellent line-up to carry out the affairs of the Williamsburg Bird Club for 2001, our 23rd year. Do show your support for this group at the November 15 meeting, the last this year.

The nominees are:

Hugh Beard, President

Dan Cristol, Vice Pres. & Program Chair

Phil Young, Vice Pres. & *Flyer* Co-editor

Bill Holcombe, Vice Pres. & *Flyer* Co-editor

Marilyn Zeigler, Secretary

Charles Rend, Treasurer

Tom Armour, Field Trip Chair and At-large Member

Lee Schuster, Member-at-large

Thank you's are also in order for Ruth Beck, Phyllis Jennings, Alex Minarik and Jandy Strickland who depart the board this year and to Charles Rend, Dan Cristol, Phil Young and Bill Holcombe who signed on for another.

FIELD NOTES FOR OCTOBER

(We try to keep up with reports of the changing bird scene as viewed by our members but, obviously, to do so we need to receive that information from all of you observers. While calling our dear departed record keeper, Bill Sheehan, was a conditioned reflex for many members, the "reflex" has become very "unconditioned" as we try to establish a new reporting system. This is a plea for phone calls, 229-8057; e-mails, howljack@aol.com; or written notes to Bill Holcombe, 4705 Lady Slipper Path, Williamsburg, Va. 23188, so that we can continue to keep the wonderful records that Bill put into place. We are interested in reporting on

"backyard" birds as they arrive and depart i.e. juncos, white-throated sparrows, yellow-bellied sapsuckers, hermit thrushes, wrens, humming-birds, etc. We are interested in reporting the tropical migrant, the water fowl, the shore birds whenever you see them. And we are interested in reporting unusual sightings or behavior whenever you see them. We also like to report any field work or vacation birding that you particularly enjoyed. Birders enjoy those trips of others as it is so easy to relate to them. Thanks for your help. Bill Holcombe)

The Returning Fall Migrants:

October 2 report from Kiptopeke: Crisp, blue days with good broad-winged hawk, accipiter, falcon and eagle migrations. Bald eagles seemed to be everywhere you looked. Several neotropical late migrants appeared including Connecticut warbler and gray-cheeked thrush. At the Northampton landfill a very blackish-blue peregrine falcon harried a flock of black skimmers that included a pied-billed grebe. Cedar waxwings, house finch, common yellowthroats, gray catbird, brown thrasher, house wren, northern flicker and tree swallows continue to be evident migrants.

At Chincoteague on the same day, there were numerous shore birds: American golden plover, black-bellied plover, semi-palmated plover, Hudsonian godwit, American oystercatcher, Baird's sandpiper, least sandpiper, pectoral sandpiper, ruddy turnstone, sanderling, spotted sandpiper, short-billed dowitcher, long-billed dowitcher, greater and lesser yellowlegs. (*Report from Ned Brinkley via the VSO e-mail network.*)

At Jamestown Island on October 7 Joy Archer found yellow bellied sapsuckers, red-headed woodpeckers, great herons, yellow-rumped warblers, osprey and yellowlegs, and pied-billed grebes on Lake Powell.

Alex Minarik had yellow-bellied sapsuckers and juncos in her yard as early as October 15 and hermit thrushes and both yellow-crowned and ruby-crowned kinglets appeared a few days later.

Bill Williams reports a great morning on October 16: "The Greenspring trail revealed its 174th species yesterday morning with the first fall dickcissel emerging from its overnight in a patch of

black willows. Among the other species present as dawn broke were white-eyed and blue-headed vireos (one each). Later in the morning a couple of northern parulas made an interesting contrast to the golden-crowned kinglets flitting about below them. Palm warblers were quite the tag-alongs with groups of eastern blue birds and chipping sparrows. One very recently fledged cedar wax-wing, also among blue birds, was feeding on devil's walking stick berries. It was a spectacular morning for just about anything."

Camp Peary report: (a composite of four weekend observations by Grace and Joe Doyle.)

Pied-billed grebe, great egret, wood duck, bufflehead, ruddy duck, bald eagle, American kestrel, wild turkey, killdeer, yellow-billed cuckoo, belted kingfisher, redheaded woodpecker, eastern wood-pewee, eastern phoebe, brown-headed nuthatch, brown creeper, ruby-crowned kinglet, yellow-rumped warbler, pine warbler, common yellow-throat, rufous-sided towhee, white-throated sparrow, dark-eyed junco, eastern meadowlark.

FINAL NOTE ON KIPTOPEKE CHALLENGE

The event contributed \$3,250 to the total raised by this event over the past three years to further the activities of Coastal Virginia Wildlife Observatory in research and education. All told, 215 species have been identified. Our team of Williams, Armour, Taber and Fenton Day had not previously reported their team name. They are the "Daylight Dudes." They did win the competition with 134 species but the Wandering Siskins raised the most money, \$1,900. The William & Mary team of Nolan Britt and Soman Kim won the six-hour category despite the absence of their third member. Brian Taber says that they have prospects for more team entries next year as the reputation of the event slowly builds.

CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT SUNDAY DECEMBER 17

I can't believe that it is time to think about the Christmas Bird Count while I am still somewhat mystified as to what happened to this summer but...the Christmas Bird Count must be

announced in this *Flyer*! About twenty members of the Bird Club are addicted to this event and can't understand why everyone doesn't come out for it.

To refresh your memories the event is still called the Audubon Christmas Bird Count although the collection and processing of the data are done by the lab at Cornell University. This will be the one hundred first anniversary of the count and the 28th for the Bird Club. This cumulative data base, which now includes over 64,000 individual counts from many different countries, is of great importance in measuring changes in bird populations. Each of the 1,823 count areas is identified by a central point and its area includes a fifteen mile radius around that point. Our point is the Colonial Williamsburg Reception Center. Our territory is divided into nine sections and a qualified leader accepts responsibility for the count in each of those areas. The areas are College Woods, Kingsmill, Hog Island, Jamestown Island, Middle Plantation, Jolly Pond, Skimino, Camp Peary and Cheatham Annex. Typically, teams for each area are in the field by 7 a.m. and quit to get a report into William & Mary by 5 p.m., when the nine reports are combined into one. That report is mailed or e-mailed into the central collection group.

Our usual day is the Sunday before Christmas unless that happens to be Christmas Eve, in which case we take the prior Sunday. Starting this year, the official count period is December 14 through January 5 inclusively. My suggestion is that we make the second Sunday before Christmas our regular count day, avoiding days too close to the holiday and making advance planning easier for everyone.

If you would like to participate in this year's count please give me a call at 229-8057. If you have a preference for an area, let me know that too. Camp Peary is limited to those cleared to go there. Sometimes other areas also have all the participants the leader wants. You may choose to work just half a day, but otherwise you need to bring lunch and a drink.

Leaders ask that you remain reasonably quiet and remind you that a constant social conversation is not necessary on these days. You should expect to spend a major portion of your time walking,

although cars are used to shift about within the territories. You should not join one of these groups if you can not spend two to three hours on your feet.

Our total count averages about 108 species. It has been as high as 115 and as low as the 90's. Last year was quite windy and our species count was 100. There is something very special about spending a day in the field in December in an operation that is taking place in much of the western hemisphere. And there are almost always some very unusual birds sighted. Why don't you give it a try? — Bill Holcombe

BIRD OF THE MONTH

The Laughing Gull by Bill Holcombe

This month I just picked a favorite bird of mine which generally disappears about this time of year. That only adds to the pleasure of seeing this handsome, lively dandy reappear in the spring. I am talking about the Laughing Gull as we see him all summer long, with his handsome black head, white rimmed, dark eyes, red beak and red legs, white tail and dark mantle, black wing tips and a white trailing edge along the wings. In their first year they are brownish and have white tails with a wide band of black on the end. Second year birds have mostly white tails with a thin band of black and show very little brown coloration. In winter the black cap dissolves into a dark mottling on the back of the head and the red bill and legs become much darker. This bird is not only handsome but it has energy and a certain presence implying confidence, if not cockiness. I love watching them as I sit on a beach house deck on a windy day, as they soar with the wind and then quarter back against it. They give an excellent impression of playing with the wind. Sibley's new guide says, "Relatively longer winged than any other gull; flight graceful with wings swept back and pointed."

There are 43 species of gulls world-wide and about 25 species in North America, including two called kittiwakes. The 18 species of terns are also part of this large family. Young, immature gulls are frequently shades of brown with a dark band on the tail. They take three years to reach the gray, white and black of mature birds. Over water, gulls

circle until they see floating food or small fishes at the surface. Then they descend, sometimes hovering and picking up the food, and sometimes landing and swimming on the surface. They do not dive as the terns do. Herring gulls, and possibly others, spit up two inch long loose pellets of fish bones, crab claws and other indigestible parts that they have ingested. They can drink either fresh or salt water and dispose of the salt through a pair of glands located at the top of the skull above the eyes. The brine solution passes out through their nostrils.

The Laughing Gull's name comes from the, raucous, long drawn out *hahn ha, ha, ha-hah, hah, hah* vocalizing that is so distinctive. Oddly, its Latin name, *ater cilla*, means black-tailed and was obviously taken from the immature birds.

The bird's range is basically coastal but can move along rivers and lakes close to the coast. It nests along the east-coast from Nova Scotia and Maine down to Florida and then along the Gulf coast to Texas. It rarely goes inland but some birds have wandered to Belize, Panama and Trinidad. It winters from North Carolina south to Central and South America but has been reported most months of the year in small numbers on the James River.

Laughing gulls are very gregarious and nest in large flocks on breeding grounds of sea cliffs, sandy islands, and marshes. The sounds from the nesting area are loud, ranging from wailing and chuckling to prolonged screams and shorter, bugle-like bursts. Mixed into all of this are the cries of the hungry young. Nests are well built of grass, weeds and sedges above the high tide mark in saltwater marshes and along beaches. Eggs are laid in Virginia, May through July in clutches of three or four brown-olive eggs with darker brown markings. Incubation is about twenty days but it is not known when the young will first fly. The gulls have one brood a year and birds are hatched with a covering of down and with eyes open. Adults feed the young by regurgitating food and holding it in the tip of the bill for the chicks to peck at. Both parents feed.

Gulls eat almost anything, ranging from small fish swimming near the surface to eggs and chicks of terns to earth worms and insects in farm fields. They have been known to alight on the head of a brown pelican and to take fish from its pouch. In

turn, they are chased by jaegers and frigate birds which force the laughing gulls to disgorge their food.

Longevity — a laughing gull in the National Zoo in Washington lived for 19 years and 7 months.

During warm weather months laughing gulls can be seen on any ferry trip and all along the rivers and beaches of Virginia and North Carolina.

NEWSLETTER DEADLINE

Your editors have found it increasingly difficult to get the newsletter written, edited, printed, folded, labeled, stapled, stamped and mailed to you a comfortable number of days in advance of the club's monthly meeting. Accordingly, we have established a deadline for receipt of inclusions from our members: *Material to be included must be received by one or other of the editors on or before the fifth day of the month that the newsletter is to be issued.*

We trust that imposing the deadline will not inhibit members from contributing. The best way to get a comment or an item included is to send it via e-mail to Bill Holcombe at <bowljack-@aol.com> or Phil Young at <pyoung@widomaker.com.> Thank you in advance for your cooperation and keep the news coming! Ed.