



THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

Volume 24, Number 11

December 2000

Merry Christmas and Good Birding for the New Year To
Members of the Bird Club, Birders and Others Who Respect Birds and Their
Habitat

From Ruth Beck:

Thanks you for the opportunity to serve as the president of the Williamsburg Bird Club this past year. It is refreshing to work with such a talented and spirited group. My wish to each of you is joy and peace for the holiday season and may your days be touched by nature's wondrous gifts.

Best Birding, Ruth

NEXT MEETING

The next meeting of the Williamsburg Bird Club will take place on Wednesday, January 17, 2000, at 7:30 p.m. in Room 117 in Millington Hall. Details will appear in the January *Flyer*.

CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT SUNDAY DECEMBER 17

Here are the territories and leaders for the Christmas Bird count. If you'd like to join the count in a particular area, call the leader and arrange for a time and place to meet. Remember that Audubon requires the payment of \$5 by each participant.

Camp Peary — Tom Armour (no additions permitted by this post)

Middle Plantation — Hugh Beard, 221-0499. Runs from James River to Waller Mill Park and

includes parts of Governors Land, Fords Colony, First Colony, the Greensprings Trail at Jamestown High School, Waller Mill Park and in between.

College Woods — Ruth Beck, 221-2217 at the College or 566-8234 at home. Includes parts of the campus, Lake Matoaka, parts of Colonial Williamsburg, College park and some other parcels.

Skimino — Bettye Fields, 930-0177. The northern end of Waller Mill park, York River State Park, and places in between.

Kingsmill — Paul McAllister, 229-1323, Parts of Kingsmill, the Country Road and related areas.

Jolly Pond — Lee Schuster, 565-6148. Includes the Jolly Pond area, the county landfill, the Boy Scout Reservation, Little Creek Reservoir and related areas.

Jamestown Island — Dot Silsby, 596-3252. Includes Jamestown Island, the nearby parkway, The Vineyards, the airport and related areas.

Hog Island — Brian Taber, 253-1181. The Ferry and Hog Island.

Cheatham Annex — Bill Williams, 229-6095. Cheatham Annex and Queens Lake.

Weather normally starts out quite cold and mellows some but it can also stay cold. Bring some lunch. You are usually in and out of cars so you can stash your lunch and any clothing you don't need there.

OTHER CHRISTMAS COUNTS

There are 44 Christmas Virginia bird counts listed in the VSO e-mail reports and they all welcome volunteer participants. Here are some nearby:

Cape Charles, Va., Dec. 30, Harry Armistead, 215-248-4120

Chesapeake Bay (Bay-Bridge Tunnel Islands), Ned Brinkley, 757-331-2483

Dismal Swamp, Jan. 1, Don Schwab, 804-934-8612

Mathews, Dec. 31, Mary Pulley, 804-725-5471

Newport News, Dec. 16, Hayes Williams, 693-4417

BIRDHOUSE STUDY RESULTS

The Birdhouse Network, sponsored by the Cornell Lab, reported the results of its 1999 season and some interesting facts were revealed. The reports are funneled to the Lab from volunteers who have set up bird houses and monitor the results. (The address, if you are interested in participating, is at the end of this article.)

While it is easy to picture the optimistic spring-time view of birds building nests, laying eggs and fledging a new bird for each egg, the results don't really follow that pattern. Seven out of the ten boxes monitored had at least one unhatched egg. In 12 % to 15% of the cases none of the eggs hatched. In about 8% of the cases some or all of the eggs hatched but none fledged. Some or all of the hatched birds fledged in something under 70% of the boxes studied, with best records coming from Mountain Bluebirds and Ash-throated Flycatchers. Those boxes fledged at least one bird in 74% of the cases. The worst results came from Black-capped Chickadees, with only 50% of the boxes producing at least one fledgling. These birds also had the worst record for hatching — i.e., no eggs hatched, accounting for 22% of the boxes.

The report included three of our common nesters: Eastern Blue Bird, Carolina Chickadee and Tufted Titmouse. All of these seemed to be about average, producing at least one fledgling per box about 70% of the time.

1999 was only the second year of this study and

Cornell would like to add more participants. If you are interested you can contact them by e-mail at <http://birds.cornell.edu/birdhouse> or mail to Cornell Lab of Ornithology, 159 Sapsucker Woods, Ithaca, New York 14850-1999 (Re: Birdhouse Network) or call 800-243-BIRD. Membership fee is \$15.

FIELD REPORTS FOR NOVEMBER

Local reports have been pretty scarce. Bill Snyder called 11/3 to say that the first Juncos had appeared on Powhatan Creek. That was also their first day in Graylin Woods. But Alex Minarik proved that was no trend saying she had them in her back yard a week earlier.

Ruth Beck experienced swarms of Robins with as many as 2,000 at one time and also saw plenty of Cedar Waxwings out Barhamsville way, plus Ruby-crowned Kinglets. She also saw American Widgeon, Hooded Mergansers, and Pied-billed Grebes. Tundra Swans also put in appearances on the lake.

At the end of November Tom Armour reported a very unusual seven Shoveler Ducks on Kingsmill Pond. They shared the pond with Ring-necked Ducks and Pied-billed Grebes.

In Graylin Woods Robins and Titmice were stripping the Pyracantha berries. A Ruby-crowned Kinglet was in their midst on one occasion. We also had a Barred Owl hooting at about four in the afternoon at the end of the month. This may have been part of an early courtship, strange as it seems to think of owls starting off the next breeding season this early.

Grace and Joe Doyle continue their monthly reports from Camp Peary based upon three weekend walks: Pied-billed Grebe, Tundra Swan, Mute Swan, Redhead Duck, Ring-necked Duck, Bufflehead, Hooded Merganser, Ruddy Duck, Bald Eagle, Killdeer, Laughing Gull, Common Tern, Belted Kingfisher, Red-headed Woodpecker, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Hairy Woodpecker, Eastern Phoebe, Brown-headed Nuthatch, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Hermit Thrush, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Pine Warbler, Eastern Towhee, Chipping Sparrow, White-throated Sparrow, Dark-eyed Junco and Eastern Meadowlark.

There have been some interesting reports on the VSO e-mail network too:

11/4 - Eastern Shore: Purple finches at Kiptopeke and Dickcissels, regularly within the first hour of daylight. Bay-Bridge Tunnel Islands: Swainson's and Hermit Thrush, Red Fox Sparrow, Clapper Rail, Grasshopper Sparrow, Lapland Longspur, Franklin's Gull.

11/16 - Kiptopeke: Gray Kingbird on Route 13 about a mile north of Sunset Beach Resort. He was working off of an electric wire catching insects in the air, and on the ground too as trucks roared by at 60 m.p.h. (This bird was reported several times in the same area.) Tom Saunders

11/20 - Chippokes: Bald Eagle, Ruddy Ducks, Bufflehead, Common Merganser, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Downy Woodpecker, Pileated Woodpecker, Winter Wren, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Cedar Waxwing, Yellow-rumped Warbler, White-throated Sparrows. Jeff Trollinger

11/26 - Russel County, Virginia. "A wonderful Whooping Crane spent her Thanksgiving in Russel County, Va. and enjoyed her holiday meal along the Clinch River west of Lebanon." Wallace Coffey

11/28 - Craney Island. "I found a female Painted Bunting at Craney Island. As I was pishing for sparrows she popped up. She flew off and disappeared in some reeds and when I went pishing there she immediately popped back into view. Those reeds also held an Orange-crowned Warbler, numerous Yellow-rumped Warblers, Palm Warblers, Common Yellow-throats, White-crowned Sparrows and a Marsh Wren." David Clark

Here are some December sightings that are interesting enough to include:

12/04 - Windmill Point "A Snowy Owl has chosen a rock jetty in the Rappahannock River as a resting place. It's been here three days. This was at Westland Beach near Whitestone. The beach is on Route 695, 7.5 miles from the corner with Route 3 in Whitestone." Ellis Squires

(A couple more reports of Snowy Owl sightings followed this report.)

12/05 - Route 617 near Zion Crossroads. A vivid description of finding six or seven Short-eared

Owls on Route 617 about one mile from Route 15, which you pick up off of Route 64. Others have since found them there also. Ken Klotz

(I'll be very happy to report such messages from our members after they've had a good walk around. Bill Holcombe <bowljack@aol.com>

FIELD TRIP FINDS THE DUCKS

On November 18 Tom Armour led a group looking for ducks. Alex Minarik, Field Trip Coordinator, had checked the territories earlier in the week and found them rather empty, but the gods of birding were smiling. A cold front moved in and so did the ducks. Working along the York River the group found Common Loons off the Yorktown beach and Bufflehead, Hooded Merganser, Ruddy Duck, American Black Duck and Wood Duck scattered along the river and in the nearby waters. A Brown Pelican was found cruising the river. Sharing the river were Laughing Gull, Bonaparte's Gull, Great Black-backed Gull and Forster's Tern. The group also picked up Belted Kingfisher, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Cedar Waxwing, Yellow-rumped Warbler and Pine Warbler. All told, they identified 38 species. The group included Tom Armour, Betty and Bill Caldwell, Ros HaLevi, Marilyn Lewis, Mike Minarik, Linda Scherer and Marilyn Zeigler.

GARDENING FOR BIRDS

Bird Club member, Mrs. Duryea Morton, invites all members of the Bird Club and interested William & Mary students to attend an illustrated talk, "Gardening for Birds," by Dr. Stephen W. Kress on Tuesday, January 16 at 1 p.m. in the Williamsburg Regional Library Theater. This program is sponsored by the Williamsburg Garden Club. The announcement reads:

"Dr. Kress, a vice-president of the National Audubon Society, will give an illustrated talk discussing how plants attract birds with sweet fruits in the summer, fatty foods just in time for migration and fruits high in carbohydrates over the long winter."

"While many of the world's great environmental problems may seem beyond our daily grasp, any

property owner can add features to his or her back yard to help create better bird habitat. Back yards of any size offer an opportunity to enrich a small piece of the earth, to bring wildlife within closer view and to create much-needed shelter, nesting and feeding places for wild birds."

Dr. Kress, author of National Audubon Society's "The Bird Garden," will discuss the interrelationships between wild birds and the plants that offer vital food, shelter and nesting habitats. While feeding birds at feeders will help to bring birds into open view, landscaping with the birds in mind can provide food throughout the season, with the result that a greater variety of birds will visit the yard than would come to feeders alone. Planting the proper mix of fruiting and flowering trees, shrubs and vines will help to meet the needs of birds throughout the season while filling your gardens with the songs and bright colors of native birds.

DOMESTIC CAT PREDATION

How many birds and other wildlife do domestic cats kill each year in the U.S.? No one knows, although reasonable extrapolations of scientific data can be made. Nationwide, cats are estimated to kill hundreds of millions of birds and more than a billion small mammals, such as rabbits, chipmunks, squirrels and shrews each year. Cats kill not only plentiful animals, but rare and endangered species for which the loss of even one animal is significant. The scientific community is becoming increasingly concerned about cat predation.

There are over 66 million pet cats in the United States. A recent poll shows approximately 35 percent are kept exclusively indoors, leaving more than 40 million owned cats free to kill birds and other wildlife, all or part of the time. In addition, millions of stray and feral cats roam our cities, suburbs, farmlands and natural areas. Abandoned by their owners or lost (stray), or descendants of strays and shunning all human contact (feral), these cats are victims of human irresponsibility through owner abandonment and the failure to spay or neuter pets. No one knows how many homeless cats there are in the U.S., but estimates range from 60 to 100 million. These creatures lead short, miserable lives.

Loss and fragmentation of wildlife habitat, resulting from development, road construction, intensive agriculture, and other land uses, are by far the leading causes of declining bird populations. However, domestic cats are numerous, efficient, non-native predators who contribute to the decline. For example, habitat fragmentation provides cats easier access to wild life that is forced to live on smaller and smaller tracts of land. Rather than providing havens for wild creatures, these smaller tracts can be death traps instead.

BIRD OF THE MONTH

Short-eared Owl by Bill Holcombe

While we have only recorded two sightings of Short-eared Owls in our annotated list, this is a Virginia breeding owl. The enthusiastic reports of sightings off of Route 64 near Zion Crossroads made me curious enough to look this bird up. Several things that seemed different about this owl made me think that others may also find the bird interesting.

First of all, this is a ground owl and it lives on every continent except Australia. It hunts both day and night and is non-vocal except during the nesting season. It roosts on the ground, sometimes in small colonies. In the prairie sections of the U.S. it assembles and hunts in packs over grasslands that are rich in mice. This doesn't sound very much like the Great Horned Owl and the Barred Owl that we live with here.

It is a good sized bird, 13 to 17 inches long, with a 38 to 44-inch wing span. The females tend to be larger than the males. It is large headed and appears to be neckless. The eyes are large and yellow against a black background. The male has a good bit of white in the face and down its breast whereas the female has a buffy coating in those areas. Both have streaked breasts with a spotted upperside flecked with buff, darker brown and some white with the male somewhat lighter. The underside of the male wings are very pale with dark tips while the female has a light buffy wash in that area. Both show large buff patches on the outer wings, with bold barring on the wingtips. There are very short ear tufts on the top of the head between the eyes but these are not always

easily seen. The legs and feet are yellowish and not feathered as are the legs of our more common owls.

During the nesting season when the birds are vocal they use a loud *eeee-yerp* when defending territory. Also there is a high pitched, rasping *wak, wak, wak* similar to the barking of a small dog. It can also use a rapidly repeated *toot-toot-toot-toot-toot*, with as many as twenty *toots*. They also make filling notes and whistle-like squeals and they snap bills and hiss as so many of the owls do.

It is found throughout most of the U.S., except in the lower southern tier of states, around the Great Lakes and in parts of the Rockies. Most of this is considered winter range except in the western states where it is considered to be a year-round resident. It migrates to northern Canada and Alaska in the summer months. However, Terres says that it nests in Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey and Virginia.

The birds engage in spectacular courtship rituals prior to nesting. It nests on the ground generally in a slight depression. The nest is sparsely lined with grass, weed stalks and a few feathers. Areas chosen are usually open fields or marshland. The bird frequently returns to the exact same spot the following year. Eggs are laid in the U.S. from March to mid-June, with June the normal laying time in Alaska and Canada. Numbers of eggs laid vary with the availability of food and can be an average of nine in high plague years of meadow voles and half of that in lean years. Incubation takes about 21 days and the young fly in about 33 days. They remain in the vicinity of the nest for about six weeks. Adults use the "crippled bird act" to lure intruders away from the nest but will also attack vigorously if the nest is threatened.

The birds feed on rodents, rabbits, gophers, bats, and in Alaska, lemmings. They also eat grasshoppers, June beetles, cutworms and small birds. They have a buoyant flight and will sail over meadows much like a marsh hawk. They will also circle and drop straight down with wings upheld when prey is spotted. They hunt most often at dusk, dawn and at night but are frequently seen hunting in the afternoon. They will aggressively chase away Crows, Marsh Hawks and Great Blue Herons during the nesting season.

While records of age are sparse, a banded Short-eared Owl was recorded at 12 years, 9 months.

Now enjoy a report from an observer:

"This evening (12/05) I enjoyed a beautiful sunset display of Short-eared Owls following Larry Lynch's directions to the Louisa County site. At 5 p.m. there was just a female Northern Harrier cruising over the field to the left of the pond, scaring up a couple of Meadowlarks. Then at 5:05 there was a well coordinated changing of the guard as the diurnal hawk settled down and out of sight to give way to two Short-eared Owls. After watching them through the scope for a few minutes they were joined by three more and I switched to binocs to follow them all. For a few minutes all five were contained in a single field of view. There were as many as six or seven all together but it was getting darker and harder to keep track. Some of them came quite close to the road and flew within twenty feet of us emitting a small cry as they flew by. It was an awesome sight at that range through the binocs and highlighted a perfect sunset.

If you go to see them you should arrive just before dusk and wait for them to come out. If you go, please stay on the state-owned right of way as there is a nearby gentleman who does not like strangers stopping and peering at the fields.

Directions: Take 64 west from Richmond to exit 136, Route 15 north. Go about 1.5 miles to Route 617, a gravel road. Turn right until you pass two white houses. Just beyond the second white house is a pond. Park along the road where you can see the pond and the field to the left of the pond. At dusk the owls come up from the pond and from around the field."

This e-mail was received from Ken Klotz and confirming messages from others have come in. The drive is about 1 hour and 30-40 minutes. Ed.