



THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

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April 2001

NEXT MEETING, APRIL 18

The Williamsburg Bird Club will next meet at 7:30 p.m. in Room 117, Millington Hall on the campus of William & Mary. This month Dan Cristol has arranged for both of the students who won the year 2000 Williamsburg Bird Club research awards to present their studies.

Emilie Snell-Rood, an undergraduate who spoke to us once before, will be describing her completed study of created wetlands in Virginia. When developers destroy wetlands they have to build replacements elsewhere. Emilie asked whether these replacements actually provide habitat for the bird species that were living in the original destroyed wetlands. Her title is "Building Red-winged Blackbird Preserves: the Success of Created Forested Wetlands as Bird Habitat."

Renaë Held, graduate student, will talk about her ongoing study of breeding Black Skimmers on the Hampton Roads Bridge-Tunnel. Renaë used new spy technology to examine the success of skimmer nests on the unusual man-made habitat created by the islands holding up the bridge. Her talk is entitled, "Lights, Camera, Skimmers!"

Have no fear, each talk will be only 15 to 20 minutes, so the entire program will be of normal length.

GORGEOUS DAY AT THE VINEYARDS

March 24 was an ideal morning for birding with pleasant temperatures and soft spring zephyrs wafting about. Although the Redhead was no longer on the pond, American Widgeon and Ring-

necked Ducks were, along with some Pied-billed Grebes. This was also the first field trip to report Osprey. In the wooded sections they also found a winter-visiting Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Golden crowned Kinglets and spring-returning Phoebes, Tree Swallows and Brown-headed Cowbirds. They were cheered by the sight of Cedar Waxwings, Brown Thrashers, Yellow-rumped Warblers, an Eastern Towhee and Eastern Meadowlarks. A total of 43 species were counted.

Tom Armour led the trip and was accompanied by Hugh Beard, Betty and Bill Caldwell, Jim Coomer, Rosiland HaLevi, Al and Meg Karb, Dick Kiefer, Marilyn Lewis, Mack Lundy, Alex Minarik, Rikin Patel and Marilyn Zeigler.

NEXT FIELD TRIP, APRIL 21

Don Schwab has recruited Tom Gwynn of the Dismal Swamp staff to help us see the tropical migrants passing through or settling in at the swamp. Maybe we'll see the elusive Swainson's Warbler this trip. The Dismal Swamp is one of the most likely spots to find the bird and, while the song has been heard on previous trips, this much-sought after little warbler, one of the drabest of the jewel-like warblers, has not been sighted yet. However, last year there was true compensation for his absence, including these warblers: Prothonotary, Blue-winged, Northern Parula, Black and White, Worm Eating, Ovenbird, Louisiana Waterthrush, Baltimore Oriole and more.

The swamp is a bit more than an hour's drive so we'll meet at 6:15 a.m. in front of Wildbirds Unlimited in the Monticello Shopping Center to form car pools. Along with your bird sighting

stuff, it is suggested that you bring insect repellent, lunch and something to drink. We'll be back at 1:30 p.m., give or take a little.

WANTED: RED SHOULDERED HAWK NESTS

Dan Cristol and Matthew Smith in the **Biology** Department at William & Mary are **conducting** research on nesting requirements of **Red-shouldered Hawks**, and you can help. **This is a bird that is suffering serious declines in population nationwide but seems to be very successful here in Williamsburg. What's the secret of its success? That's the point of this research project.** If you know of an active or recent **Red-shouldered Hawk nest or a pair near your house that you think is nesting on the premises, give Dan Cristol a call.** We'd love to add your hawks to the study. Dan says, "Please contact us soon so we can **find the nest while the leaves are off of the trees. Thanks in advance for your help.**"

SPRING BIRD COUNT, APRIL 29

The demands of other area birding activity preempted the first two Sundays in May, so we will be a trifle earlier this year with the **April 29th** date. Brian Taber, coordinator, says that **while we may miss a few thrushes, the thinner foliage may very well give us more of the earlier migrants and still-present winter visitors.**

The Spring Bird Count is organized **exactly** along the lines laid out for the Audubon Christmas Count. We cover the same nine areas. **They are formed by a 15-mile diameter circle centered on the Colonial Williamsburg Information Center. These include Cheatham Annex and Camp Peary on the James River and the area west of there called Skimino. South from Skimino to the James River is Middle Plantation. East of there is the Jamestown Island area and farther east is Kingsmill. In the middle of this circle is College Woods, centering on William & Mary and east. Jolly Pond fills out the western part of the circle. Across the James, all by itself, is Hog Island which is permitted to include the birds observed on the ferry trip crossing the James.**

Each of these areas has an experienced birder

coordinating the coverage and turning in the count for the territory. Observers are in the field by 7 a.m. or soon thereafter and some start with an owl search much earlier than that. By 3:30 or 4 p.m. the coordinators are heading for Millington Hall where the count is consolidated into a master document. The average species count for this 22-year old event usually exceeds 150 by just a few. Last year's count was down a bit at 147. It included 23 warblers and close to 50 tropical migrants.

If you would like to learn about one of these areas or improve your birding skills by spending a day or even a half a day with one of these leaders, you are urged to participate. Or if you just love birding at this time of the year and want an enjoyable day in the field, please come out. Please call one of these leaders to arrange a meeting time and place:

Camp Peary: Only Grace and Joe Doyle and cleared participants are permitted.

Cheatham Annex; Bill Williams 229-6095

College Woods, Ruth Beck, 804-566-8234

Hog Island, Brian Taber, 253-1181

Jamestown Island, Dot Silsby, 596-3252

Jolly Pond, Lee Schuster, 565-6148

Kingsmill, Paul McAllister, 229-1323

Middle Plantation, Hugh Beard, 221-0499

Skimino, Bettye Fields, 930-0177

Recommendations: Bring lunch, something to drink, insect repellent, wear long sleeves, long pants and a hat. Most of all, have a good time and see lots of birds!

FIELD NOTES FOR MARCH

(We normally don't report the most commonly seen area birds but urge you to report migrating birds and strangers to Bill Holcombe, 229-8057.)

During the month some of the water fowl headed north but there were still plenty around. The **Juncos, White-throated Sparrows, Hermit Thrushes, Kinglets, Cedar Waxwings and Sapsuckers** are still being reported, but so have the returning **Osprey, Laughing Gulls, Phoebe's, Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, Chipping Sparrows, and Tree Swallows.** The early warblers seem to be rather scarce but we got a few more late

reports of **Baltimore Orioles** showing up in February and one more this month. Some of our residents have started nesting.

March 1 — **Winter Wren**, Bill Holcombe's yard.

March 2 — Julie Hotchkiss sees first **Osprey** fussing with a **Bald Eagle** over the James River. Also reported large raft of **Red-breasted Mergansers**, with a few **Goldeneye** mixed in, feeding very actively on the James. She had some newly arrived **Fish Crows** behaving very erratically, "like they'd eaten something alcoholic." Saw her first nesting **Carolina Wren**. And Julie reported for First Colony neighbor, Jackie Fetner who had a partial albino **House Finch** with a white head on her feeder.

March 3 — The Route 199 - Route 5 pond had a pair of **Hooded Mergansers** to go with the nesting **Canada Geese** and a **Sharp-shinned Hawk**, flapping and gliding across the area.

March 4 — David Martin had **Osprey** and three **Brown Pelicans**.

March 5 — Rosemarie Tieffel had a **Baltimore Oriole** on her feeder.

March 6 — Tom Armour spotted twelve **Common Merganser** on the York River along with five **Horned Grebes**. In Kingsmill he had a **Hermit Thrush** and four **Wood Ducks** on the pond in back of his house.

March 10 — While on the College Creek Hawk Watch Tom Armour had a **Cooper's Hawk**, ten **Brown Pelicans** and two **Laughing Gulls**.

March 11 — Joe Doyle reports from Camp Peary four **Osprey** (his first), a raft of **Canvasbacks** on the James and **Ring-necked Ducks** on the beaver pond with two **Tundra Swans**. Looked to him like the **Ruddy Ducks** had left.

Pair of **Hairy Woodpeckers** sighted moving through Bill Holcombe's yard.

March 16 — Bill Snyder has **Common Merganser** on Powhatan Creek.

March 17 — At College Creek (off the Parkway) Bill Williams saw three **Lesser Black-backed Gulls** and at Hog Island that morning four **Pectoral Sandpipers**, three "western" **Palm Warblers** and a singing **Fox Sparrow**. Bill reports from the Greensprings Nature Trail

(behind the Jamestown High School) six pairs of nesting **Osprey**.

March 19 — Bill Snyder sees first **Osprey** on Powhatan Creek. **Sharp-shinned Hawk** seen sitting on Bill Holcombe's feeder pole.

March 21 — **Blue-gray Gnatcatcher** seen in Bill Holcombe's yard. And his first **Phoebe**, next day.

March 24 — Tom Armour sees **Red-throated Loon** on the James.

March 25 — Hog Island. On the ferry **Laughing Gulls** were back but the **Ring-bill Gulls** still predominated. **Osprey** nesting on the last channel marker before far docking. Three **Royal Terns** and one **Coot** at the dock. At the Chippokes Swamp, **Gray Catbird**, **Pine Warbler**, **Hooded Merganser**, **Swamp Sparrow** and a **Barred Owl**, heard and seen. At Hog Island, **Green-winged Teal**, **Hooded Mergansers**, **Ring-necked Ducks**, twelve **Shovelers**, one **Great Egret**, **Bald Eagle**, and **Kestrel**. Best bird of the day at the top of the entrance road near the river: a **Merlin**.

Same day, Bill Williams spotted a **Purple Martin** in town near Matthew Whaley School.

March 27 — Tom Armour sees **Wood Ducks** enter the nest box set up on his pond.

Month of March — Joe and Grace Doyle report on weekly trips to Camp Peary: **Pied-billed Grebes**, **Tundra Swan**, **Wood Duck**, **American Widgeon**, **Canvasback**, **Ring-necked Duck**, **Lesser Scaup**, **Bufflehead**, **Hooded Merganser**, **Red-breasted Merganser**, **Ruddy Ducks** (3/4), **Wild Turkey**, **Osprey**, **Bald Eagle**, **American Kestrel**, **Killdeer**, **Common Tern**, **Red-headed Wood-pecker**, **Eastern Phoebe**, **Tree Swallow** (first, 3/25.) **Brown-headed Nuthatch**, **Golden-crowned Kinglet** (3/4) **Yellow-rumped Warbler**, **Pine Warbler**, **Eastern Towhee**, **Chipping Sparrow**, **Field Sparrow**, **Fox Sparrow**, **Eastern Meadowlark**.

Although this is an April 2 report, *this* is too good to wait! Tom Armour saw swirls in the pond behind his house and while he stood there "Pissshhing," three **otters** popped to the surface!

Spring was also in the e-mail reports on the Audubon-VSO Birdline:

Feb. 26 — Crossing the James River Bridge Don Schwab saw a single **Red-necked Grebe** on the

east side of the northern end of the bridge.

March 7 — **Loggerhead Shrike** still near the Route 55-Route 28 intersection. And **White-fronted Goose** and **Eurasian Widgeon** on nearby farm ponds.

March 10 — Still seeing 7 or 8 **Short-eared Owls** at Zion Crossroad location.

March 13 — First **Purple Martins** arrive in Abbington, Va.

March 17 — First **Barn Swallow** at Huntley Meadows, Fairfax County.

March 19 — First **Louisiana Waterthrush** reported in Gloucester County.

March 21 — Ned Brinkley reports **Purple Martins** and **Blue-headed Vireos** in the Cape Charles area. He also reported a rarely seen **Razorbill**, flying in a cloud of **Northern Gannets** from the Bay-bridge Islands.

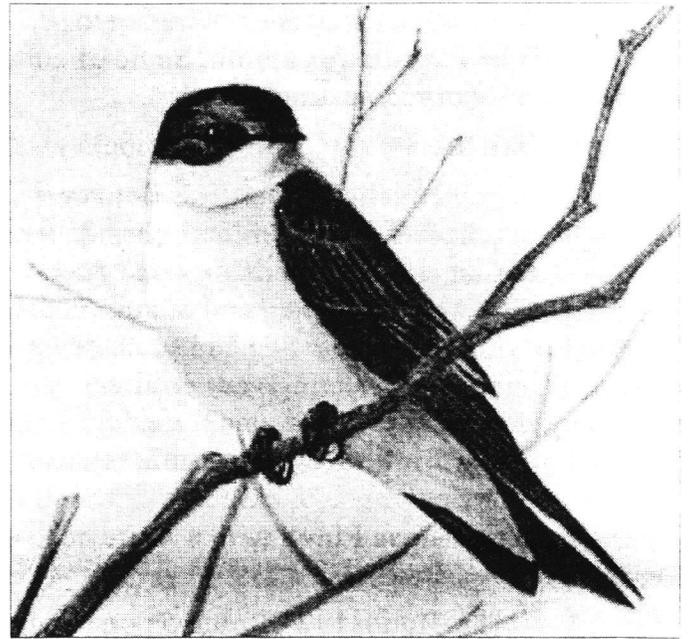
Weekly reports from the banding operation on the Eastern Shore had yet to find any migrating warblers by the end of the month.

BIRD OF THE MONTH

The Tree Swallow by Bill Holcombe

As this is one of our earliest tropical migrants and one that stays nearly the longest, it seems like a good time to take a look at it.

There are 79 species of swallows spread over the earth except for the polar regions New Zealand and some oceanic islands. The English name comes from Old Norse, *svala*, and Anglo-Saxon, *swalwe*. Swallows and martins are species within the same family but swifts belong to a separate group. Swallows and martins are especially adapted to aerial life and show no close ties to any other bird group. All are slender, sleek birds flying in darting flight with wide-gaping mouths open to scoop up hundreds of insects. They have long been beloved in North America as harbingers of Spring that devour unwanted insects. They readily nest near human habitat. They follow the temperatures north in the spring and studies of Barn Swallows show that they closely follow the 48 degree isotherm. Records also show that the myths about swallows arriving on a certain calendar day are just that, as their early or late



Tree Swallow

arrival is based upon temperature and can vary by about two weeks.

The Tree Swallow is 5 to 6 inches long with a 12 to 13-inch wing span and weighs $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ of an ounce. Sexes look alike with steely blue-black or green-black above and pure, clear white below.

They nest widely in North America from Alaska all across Canada and along the Pacific Coast to California and on the Atlantic Coast to Virginia. Within this expanse they usually choose areas well watered with streams, lakes or ponds. They winter in southern California, Mexico, along the Gulf Coast and across southern United States to Virginia and south of United States into central America and Cuba. Virginia sits on the border of the summer-winter range and while vast numbers of Tree Swallows gather and migrate in the fall and return in the spring, scattered numbers of them have been reported all months of the year.

While these birds are basically insect eaters and migrate with temperatures that support insect populations, they can also survive when necessary on seeds and berries. Normally, their low veering, side-to-side flight, over meadows, ponds and streams, scooping up insects as they go, is the chosen feeding method. Flying beetles, ants, flies, bees, wasps and grasshoppers make up much of the diet.

Nesting time is April to June. Nests are built by the female, sometimes with help from the male.

The males, however, have been known to have two mates at the same time. Nesting is most often by isolated pairs but loose colonies are not uncommon. These are cavity nesters using old woodpecker holes, eaves of houses and barns, and mailboxes. They readily use man-made nesting boxes. Nests are of grass and straw with a preference for chicken feathers when available. Four to six white eggs are laid. Incubation is 13-16 days and flight occurs 16 to 24 days later. Males frequently perch and vocalize in the nesting area. The male courts the female in flying pursuits of aerial gyrations while singing a rapidly repeated note, *silip* (sorry, I could not find a better description. Ed.)

Ideal habitat for these birds is found at Hog Island and around the Beaver Pond on the Green Springs Nature Trail. In warm weather they can almost always be found sitting on the phone wires along the Hog Island roads. Large flocks gather there in the fall.