



# THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

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## NEXT MEETING

The Williamsburg Bird Club will meet on Wednesday evening, March 20 at 7:30, in room 117 Millington Hall, William & Mary campus.

The speaker will be Catherine Markham, a graduate student at William and Mary's Center of Conservation Biology. Ms. Markham's program will concern the Bald Eagle, recently removed from the Federal Endangered Species List. There is a lot of debate about whether the local population is out of danger yet and her research aims to get at that question. Come learn more about Catherine's exciting eagle research, the biology of local eagles and the Center for Conservation Biology, an important center for regional conservation right here in Williamsburg.

## CLAY-COLORED SPARROW SEEN ON GREENSPRINGS TRAIL TRIP

Bill Williams led a large turnout of thirty birders down his favorite Greensprings Nature Trail on February 23. The group spent a good deal of time on the bridge over the Beaver Pond as new birds kept showing up. A Ruby-crowned Kinglet was spotted at the bridge entrance. Half way farther down the bridge a Golden-crowned Kinglet plainly displayed his crown as he hopped about in a nearby tree for several minutes. Then there were Hermit Thrush, Swamp Sparrow, White-throated Sparrow, Rufous-sided Towhee, brilliant Bluebirds and a Bald Eagle overhead, plus the usual array of common birds. In the open Mainland Farm area there was a mating pair of Killdeer, flocks of migrating Robins and a circling Red-tailed Hawk.

As we approached the point where the trail turns north back toward Route 5 Bill mentioned that he

had twice seen the Clay-colored Sparrow at this corner, in the midst of a mixed flock of sparrows. Another such flock covered the ground in the area. It seemed spooky and whooshed away from time to time. We stopped about 75 yards away from it and scanned them. Then we saw a clearly smaller and lighter colored bird flit to the ground. Bill felt certain that this was *the* bird and when he got it centered in a scope he confirmed it.

It was a bright, cold satisfying day.

## VINEYARDS FIELD TRIP

**Please Note:** This Field trip is not on the Saturday immediately following the meeting; rather, it is the *second* Saturday following the meeting, March 30, 2002. Randy Coleman who lives at the Vineyards will lead the trip. There have been ducks on the pond all winter with the species shifting about a bit. Ring Bills, American Widgeon, Gadwalls and Black Ducks are usually in the mix. It's a good area for hawks and waxwings too.

The group will meet in the parking area by the club house and tennis courts at 7:30. Turn left off Lake Powell Road at the second entrance. Do not go to the Winery. When the entrance road reaches a tee, turn right and continue until you see the recreation area.

## SPRUCING UP BLUEBIRD TRAIL

Bird Club volunteers maintain a trail of Bluebird nesting boxes at the York River State Park and February was the month to get ready for another nesting season. Early in the month they installed a new box donated by the Williamsburg/James City County Master Gardeners. (Shirley Devan, who coordinates this work, says that it is a very pretty

super box “and we are waiting to see the birds fight over it.”) The volunteers also replaced ten dilapidated boxes with new standard boxes purchased by the club. Over the past two years the volunteers have replaced over half of the park boxes with the assistance of the park staff and with funds from the club.

Getting ready for the start of the new season in mid-March, Tony and Chris Dion, Dorothy Whitfield, Judy Bishop, Jack and Terry Johnston and Shirley gathered in the Park to repair and replace eleven of the 41 bluebird boxes that they will maintain and record this year. Chris Dion and Dorothy Whitfield also painted new numbers on all of the boxes.

In an effort to boost the number of Chickadee and Bluebird fledglings they also relocated several boxes that had not produced any birds in the last two years. Last season the boxes fledged a record 115 Bluebirds and 15 Chickadees. This continues the annual increase in fledged birds since 68 were fledged in 1998.

If you want to join the bird box monitoring at York River State Park this season, call me at 565-2352 (day phone.) — Shirley Devan

## FIELD NOTES FOR FEBRUARY

*(We need lots of input to produce this report and welcome reports to Bill Holcombe at 229-8057 or e-mail to [howljack@aol.com](mailto:howljack@aol.com). Ed.)*

Osprey are back and Marilyn Zeigler at College Creek and Sue Garret from Kingspoint had first reports in early February. Bill Williams had one mid-month at Greensprings. Brian Taber reported one over the James on February 22 and Julie Hotchkiss spotted one there on Feb. 27.

Feb. 1 – Bill Holcombe saw his first Hermit Thrush and Brown Creeper this winter in Graylin Woods.

Feb. 3 – Bill Williams sees the Clay-colored Sparrow again on the Greensprings trail and a Fox Sparrow in the same area. Then over on the York River he found the Snow Bunting still on location near the Indian Fields parking area. On the river were seven Common Loons, a Brown Pelican, about a dozen Golden-eyes, a Forster's Tern and three Bonaparte's Gulls.

Feb. 6 – Tom Armour had two Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers and a Purple Finch in his back yard along with the Rufous Hummingbird still hanging out. He found twelve Coot at the Kingsmill Marina and on the pond, a Great Egret, a Lesser Scaup and 25 Hooded Mergansers.

Feb. 12 – Bill Holcombe was unsuccessful looking for the Snowy Owl at Craney Island but did find lots of ducks: 2,000 Ruddy Ducks with smaller numbers of Gadwall, American Wigeon, Ring-necked Ducks and Lesser Scaup with Bufflehead mixed in. In another area were six Northern Shovelers and groups of Hooded Mergansers, Red-breasted Mergansers and a scattering of Common Goldeneye.

Feb. 14 – Tom McGarvey stops at Indian Fields on the York River and finds the Snow Bunting still there!

Feb. 20 – Ruth Beck reports Red-breasted Nuthatch, Purple Finches, Pine Siskins and hundreds of Gold Finches at her feeders.

Feb. 20 – Alex Minarik finds a Baltimore Oriole on her log feeder eating her mixture of lard, peanut butter, corn meal, flour, and seed. (This is second oriole report this winter) She also sees Wild Turkey and Purple Finch almost daily. Her active backyard produced 24 species for the Great Back Yard Bird Count.

Feb. 24 – Tom Armour reports from the Kingsmill Marina: Brown Pelican, nine Coot, 45 Forster's Terns, 30 Great Black-backed Gulls, 40 Ring-billed Gulls and 15 Herring Gulls.

Feb. 25 – Hermit Thrush has a comically difficult time eating from Bill Holcombe's suet feeder.

Feb. 28 – Tom Armour reports that the first Wood Ducks came to his pond on the 27<sup>th</sup> and six were there on the 28<sup>th</sup>.

Feb. 28 – Bill Holcombe almost had an accident gaping at three Boat-tailed Grackles on the weeds at the 199-Route 5 pond.

**Camp Peary in February** – Grace and Joe Doyles' four weekly trips to Camp Peary produced an average of 41 species. The highlights were: Tundra Swan, Mute Swan, Wood Duck, Gadwall, American Widgeon, Canvasback, Ring-necked Duck, Lesser Scaup, Bufflehead, Hooded Merganser, Ruddy Duck, Bald Eagle, Northern Harrier, Wild Turkey, Northern Bobwhite, Barred

Owl, Belted King-fisher, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Eastern Phoebe, Fish Crow, Brown-headed Nuthatch, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Hermit Thrush, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Pine Warbler, Rufous-sided Towhee, Fox Sparrow, White-throated Sparrow and Eastern Meadowlark.

## **REPORTS FROM VA BIRD E-MAIL**

Feb. 6 – Another *Selasphorus* Hummingbird shows up in Hampton ...

Feb. 7 – ... and still another continues to be observed in Fairfax County.

Feb. 10– A female Common Redpoll at a thistle feeder in Richmond for at least a week. (Last remembered report here was about 1997 off of Bush Creek Road.)

Feb.10 – A Golden eagle seen near Warrenton.

Feb. 16 – Ben Copeland of Hampton finds two Lapland Longspurs at Craney Island in the same general area where the Snowy Owl had been. He also noted the very large number of ducks in the area, including Redheads.

Feb. 21 – A California Gull is identified in Fairfax county.

Feb. 25 – Another rare gull, the Glaucous Gull, is found at a landfill near Manassas.

Feb. 25 – A birder in Lovettsville says that his family can sit on their front porch and be entertained every evening by the aerial display of Woodcocks doing their courtship routine. They circle to a great height and then drop to earth with exotic twittering sounds the whole way.

There were also frequent reports all month long about the Barnacle Geese in Alexandria and elsewhere in Fairfax County.

## **UNUSUAL PRESENCE OF BARNACLE GOOSE**

Barnacle Geese present in the Washington area this winter have been unusual enough to prompt birders from all over Virginia and Maryland to search them out. But this phenomenon has not been limited to Washington. Allen Hart, a Virginia birder, was prompted to prepare a list of sightings made along the east coast this winter.

The name goes back to the middle ages when the Europeans knew nothing of the land north of their continent and explained the appearance each fall of these birds coming across the water “from nowhere” with a myth that they had hatched from barnacles. This is primarily an Old World goose that nests in Greenland and on the coast of North America. On this continent it is occasionally found in winter as far south as North Carolina. It resembles the Canada Goose except that the entire face is white and the black on the neck extends down the front of the breast.

Allen Hart reports this year’s unusual numerous sightings starting with Gloucester, MA, 12/07 and continues: Hook Pond, NY, Mansfield, CT, Storrs, CT, Portsmouth, RI, Calverton, NY, Northville, NY, Fairfax, VA, Alexandria, VA, Warren County, NJ, Bucks County, PA, Wakefield, MA.

## **SPECIES EARLY AND LATE DATES**

For twenty or so years Bill Sheehan kept wonderful records of the bird sightings that were reported to him. The records are voluminous and are kept in eight loose leaf ring binders. In 1997 on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the bird club those records were distilled into a booklet, “Birds of the Williamsburg Area, An Annotated List.” 332 species are listed as breeders or transients, common or uncommon, where they have been seen, best birding spots in the area, the earliest arrival dates of migrating species and the latest dates seen here. I have Sheehan’s record books and have agreed to update arrival and departure dates as they are reported to me and to add notes on rare species reports such as this winter’s Snow Bunting and Clay-colored Sparrow. Remember now, I can only record what is reported to me or my own observations. I need your help.

We are now at the time of year when our winter residents will be departing and the warm weather residents arriving. As you can see in the Field Notes the arrival of Osprey was well reported. Here are some other birds with March arrival dates: (Note the six early warblers at the end of this list.) Cattle Egret, March 9; Yellow-crowned Night Heron, March 18; Black-bellied Plover, March 24; Caspian Tern, March 27; Royal Tern, March 6; Purple Martin, March 9; Northern

Rough-winged Swallow, March 10; Bank Swallow, March 31; Barn Swallow March 11; Northern Parula, March 31; Yellow-throated Warbler, March 14; Prairie Warbler, March 30; Black and White Warbler, March 26; Ovenbird, March 20; Louisiana Waterthrush, March 16. While the Phoebe and the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher have been reported here in all months, there is clearly a returning warm weather population and reports on all of these birds are valuable both to our monthly field reports and to the Sheehan records.

Our winter visitors essentially don't leave until May or June and so we will list some of those late dates next month. — Bill Holcombe

## **One Minute Lesson:**

### **THE INCUBATION PATCH**

*(We'll try to pick up on this new feature of the regular meetings if we can find suitable material. Ed.)*

A great many birds, but not all, have a very special adaptation to help them successfully incubate their eggs. This is called an incubation patch and all passerines or songbirds have the feature. When incubation begins the sitting bird supplies body heat to its eggs through this patch, which forms as incubation commences. This is a featherless area of bare skin on the underside or belly of the bird. During the breeding season the skin thickens there and a dense concentration of blood vessels develops beneath it. When the bird settles on the nest it puffs out its breast feathers and shuffles around until it brings the patch of skin into contact with the eggs.

The patch forms in several stages and is prompted by the bird's endocrine system. The down feathers are all molted several days before the bird lays its first egg. Then the patch develops. This condition lasts through incubation and the first part of brooding the young birds. Gradually the patch subsides and in the fall molt it is refeathered.

*(This information was taken from The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds by John Terres. Ed.)*

## **A BIG YEAR FOR SNOWY OWLS**

*(The exceptional number of Snowy Owls in the Mid-Atlantic States this year prompted James Gorman to write a piece in the New York Times about it, which we've condensed quite a bit. Ed.)*

There have been a lot more Snowy owls in the Northeast this winter than is usual. They have been seen in Boston, on Long Island, in Connecticut, New Jersey, Virginia and North Carolina. Mr. Norman Smith who is the Director of the Trailside Museum in Milton Massachusetts has been a student of this bird for many years. Since 1981 he has been capturing and banding owls in the vicinity of Logan Airport and moving them to areas where they don't pose a threat to air traffic. He has dealt with as many as 47 Snowy Owl and as few as one in one winter at the airport.

He isn't sure why the birds sometimes come south and sometimes do not. He finds the owls that show up in Massachusetts are mostly young birds in excellent health suggesting that starvation is not what sends them south. He doesn't think that the conventional wisdom that says the fluctuations in the arctic lemming population upon which these owls feed, prompts the southern wandering. He says that theory also says that the birds never find their way back north. But he has attached transmitters to some of his banded owls and found that they did return to the north, sometimes after a hiatus of several years.

He believes that the owls will eat anything that they can kill and he has evidence of a wide range of what they can kill. He watched a Northern Harrier buzz a resting owl that seemed almost asleep. Eventually the harrier's talons touched the owl's head upon which the owl soared into the air, caught the Harrier and had it for lunch. He has seen an owl kill a Great Blue Heron and watched one take a Kestrel out of the air. This impressive bird has a height of 20 to 27 inches, a wingspan of 54 to 66 inches and is powerfully built. On average it is larger than the Great Horned Owl.

So far this year, Mr. Smith has caught and banded 21 Snowy Owls and has sighted eight others. His tracking project has produced no grand conclusions but many stories including recapturing a Snowy Owl at Logan Airport eight years after the first banding. Of course, he rebanded the bird and sent it on its way.

(Our Snowy Owl was present at Craney Island from the time of the Christmas Bird Count until late February. It was found by many of the birders who went looking for it including Ruth Beck and Alex Minarik. This was also assumed to be a young owl as it had not yet developed the pure white dress of the mature bird. Ed.)