



# THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

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## NEXT MEETING

Summer is here and we won't have a meeting until Wednesday, September 18. It will begin at 7:30 p.m. in Room 117 Millington Hall, on the William & Mary campus. The editors also get a summer vacation so there will be no July *Flyer*, but "God willing and if the creek don't rise," there will be an August issue.

## RAIN CURTAILS FIELD TRIP TO YORK RIVER STATE PARK

Skies were threatening and the wind was fierce at the beginning of the trip to the York River State Park on May 18. Despite all of that, leader Tom Armour found some very nice birds before the rains came flooding down. Migrants included the Eastern Wood-Pewee, Eastern Phoebe, Eastern Kingbird, White-eyed Vireo, Red-eyed Vireo, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Wood Thrush, Yellow-throated Warbler, Blackpoll Warbler, American Redstart, Ovenbird, Kentucky Warbler, Summer Tanager and Scarlet Tanager. Cedar Waxwings also made their appearance prior to the rain. A total of 34 species was recorded.

Participants included: Tom Armour, Bill and Betty Ann Caldwell, Kristin Froehlic, Clarence Givens, Carol and Dan Goff, Bill Holcombe, Dick Kiefer, Carolyn Lowe, Tom McCary and Marilyn Zeigler.

## FIRST NEW U.S. SPECIES IN 100 YEARS FOUND IN COLORADO

*(The editors got this story from Joy Archer who found it in the Denver Post and sent in the clippings. While we must shorten it, we hope to keep the drama and the humor intact.)*

After scientists declared the Gunnison Sage Grouse a new species two years ago, a wide spot on Gunnison County (Colorado) Road 887, has become an international bird-watching sensation. Birders from around the world wait silently in the cold dark of a Colorado spring pre-dawn to hear the "Thwoomp! Thwoomp! Thwoomp!" of a male Gunnison Sage Grouse preparing to mate. The noise comes from specialized air sacs on the bird's chest. And this is now one stop on a well-traveled 1,000 mile circuit being traveled by birders wanting to add this Gunnison bird, plus the Chukar, the Greater Sage Grouse, the White-tailed Ptarmigan, the Greater Prairie Chicken and the Lesser Prairie Chicken to their life lists.

It was not always like this. Prior to the two-year-ago decision by the Ornithological Union that this was a new species and that it was to be named the Gunnison Sage Grouse, only a very few specialists in the birding world had ever even thought of this grouse. That story starts in 1977 and, with many ups and downs and turf battles, didn't end until the year 2000 announcement.

In 1977 the Colorado Division of Wildlife became interested in possible variations in sage grouse and asked hunters to clip the wings from grouse and leave them in collection barrels scattered around the state. Investigation by Clait Braun showed the grouse in the Gunnison basin to have shorter wings, shorter beaks and longer tail feathers than their cousins. This raised suspicions of a different species but it wasn't until, Jessica Long, a Purdue doctoral candidate moved into the sage brush to study the bird in the 1980's that more detailed information began to emerge. She found that other sage grouse make their booming mating calls by inflating their air sacs twice every six seconds or so and then, after a short time, usually collapse in exhaustion. The Gunnison birds wooing tactics

were to inflate every ten seconds and keep this up for up to three hours. Long tried tapes of the Gunnison birds wooing tactics on more distant grouse and brought tapes of those birds to the Gunnison "leks." (She identified "leks" as a singles bar of the avian world where grouse meet year after year to search for mates, but gave no more description.) Gunnison female birds were only turned on by the Gunnison style booming. As Long said, "What do females want? They like the slow but steady guys. The others were fast and not as steady. The Gunnison females avoided them."

This led to laboratory comparisons of grouse DNA in 1993. This was the genetic proof that the Colorado research biologists needed but the battle wasn't over. The researchers presented their findings to the American Ornithological Union which agreed that it was a new species but denied the name, "The Gunnison Sage Grouse," arguing that biologists didn't name birds, taxonomists did. Those folks chose to call the Gunnison bird the Lesser Sage Grouse and the other birds The Greater Sage Grouse. The biologists were furious, feeling that residents of Colorado's Western Slope would have little support for a bird that easterners deemed "lesser." Braun of the Wildlife Department led this fight and a confrontation followed at Colby College in Maine when he sat down with Richard Banks of the American Ornithological Union committee on new species. Voices were raised and there was no handshake at the end of the meeting. Then, seeking a compromise, Braun offered agreement that the scientific name be *Centrocercus minimus*, reflecting the bird's smaller size.

Finally, in 2000 the Ornithological Union announced that the new bird was to be called the Gunnison Sage Grouse. Around the world birders cheered. Then they bought plane tickets. Last year more than 1,000 birders from 25 states and three foreign countries came in hopes of hearing that distinctly different boom and to focus their binoculars on the Gunnison Sage Grouse.

## **BLUEBIRD NESTING BOX TRAIL DOES WELL AT YORK RIVER PARK**

*(A report from Shirley Devan, Chairman of this Club Committee)*

The fledges from the nesting boxes on the York River State Park trail are doing very well and better

than last year. As of May 25, 56 bluebirds fledged in 2002 compared to 48 in 2001. Only six Chickadees fledged in 2001 as compared to twenty this year. Right now (May 25) there are another 36 Bluebirds "in process." We have 27 eggs and six nestlings.

In one of the boxes this week, a Bluebird was so impatient that she built her nest on top of an abandoned Chickadee nest! Forces of nature are a wonder to behold!

*The Club and the community owe Shirley and her hard-working colleagues a vote of thanks for the contribution that they make every year to our bird world.*

## **FIELD NOTES FOR MAY**

**CORRECTIONS:** Last month the Robins nesting on Bill Snyder's down spout got left out of his "nesting report." Chuck Rend wrote to say that he agrees with Bill about the very low level of Bobwhite presence but he did hear one call in April at the York River State Park. Chuck also pointed out that he had an Orchard Oriole and a Red-headed Woodpecker on April 18 at York River and neither bird made last month's Field report. A few also showed up on the Spring Count.

We also mixed up the dates on Marilyn Zeigler's Rose-breasted Grosbeak which was on her feeder April 20, 21, 22 and 24 and returned May 1, and the female May 9. The significance of the first date is that it is a new early date for the Rose-breasted Grosbeak. Ruth Beck also had Rose-breasted Grosbeaks in May but we don't have the date.

May 5 – Shirley Devan and Dorothy Whitfield found a Summer Tanager, many Indigo Buntings, Eastern Kingbird and many Goldfinches at York River State Park. "Also probably heard several warblers but could not identify their songs."

May 7 – Shirley Devan had a Life Bird show up and pose on her feeder when a Rose-breasted Grosbeak appeared, the first that she had ever seen.

May 21 – Tony Dion says that the Barn Swallows nesting on his front porch are raising a family. When he cuts the grass, the parents trail 10-20 feet away and are close enough that he can see them scoop up the insects disturbed by his mowing, rush them to the nest and then return to repeat the process.

May 28 – Tony Dion had a family of orchard orioles in his bird bath.

## NOTES FROM AROUND VIRGINIA

*(From the VA-Bird e-mail)*

There were almost 300 listings on this report. Some of them from locations farther west reported 100 species seen on an outing. They were filled with migrants and up to twenty warblers is enough to make us wonder why we don't venture farther in that direction. A few will be reported in their entirety:

May 1 – A white American Crow in Annondale

May 2 – Baltimore Orioles in cherry tree, at Grundy, August County. Glaucous Gull on the Chesapeake Bay Tunnel

May 3 – Yellow Chat in yard at Virginia Beach

All together in an August County back yard: Black-throated Green Warbler, Northern Parula, Scarlet Tanager.

Bobolinks in Staunton

Richmond James River Park, 42nd Street Section: Scarlet Tanager, Baltimore Oriole, Orchard Oriole, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Veery, Swainson's Thrush and Warblers: Black and White, Yellow-throated, Yellow-rump, Hooded, Canada, Blue-winged, Black-throated Blue, Black-throated Green, Louisiana Waterthrush, Northern Waterthrush, Northern Parula, Yellow, Redstart, Prothonotary and three Wilson's.

May 6 – Harris Sparrow still at Weyer's Cave.

May 8 – Wilson's Plover at Craney Island and Eurasian Collared Dove, ESNWR

May 9 – Upland Sandpiper, Fauquier County Staunton, near School for the Deaf, all in one morning: Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Swainson's Thrush, Wood Thrush, Wood-Pewee, Scarlet Tanager and Warblers: Blackpoll, Magnolia, Redstart and Black-throated Blue.

May 10 – Lincoln Sparrow, Alexandria

Lark Bunting, Chincoteague

May 12 – Jamestown Island, Orchard Orioles, Magnolia Warbler, Summer Tanager, (many) Great-crested Flycatchers.

Lark Sparrow, Highland County

On the Woodland trail, Chincoteague: Yellow-

throated Vireo, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Eastern Towhee, Brown-headed Nut-hatch, Northern Bobwhite, House Wren, Great-crested Flycatcher, Olive-sided Flycatcher and Warblers: Black-throated Blue, Black-throated Green, Northern Waterthrush, Magnolia, Black-burnian, Pine and Yellow-breasted Chat.

Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Springfield

May 15 – Swallow-tailed Kite near York River Yacht Haven.

May 16 – Nighthawks over Alexandria.

May 17 – Blue Ridge Parkway, Afton to Humpback Rocks: Our first time birding the Parkway: Life-bird, Cerulean Warbler plus Black and White, Blackpoll, Yellow-breasted Chat, Redstart, Worm-eating, Hooded, Prairie and Ovenbird. Lots of Indigo Buntings and we enjoyed Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, Wood Peewees, Phoebe's, Orchard Orioles, Summer Tanager, Red-eyed Vireo, Yellow-billed Cuckoo and Wood Thrush

May 18 – Eastern Shore following a storm: a field with 500 Semipalmated Plovers and another with 250 Black-bellied Plovers.

May 19 – Magnificent Frigatebird crossing the James River from Hampton to the mothball fleet.

Mourning Warbler at Monticello

## SPECIAL MAY MORNING REPORT

*Despite the volume from Va-bird e-mail, condensing loses the flavor of many of these very well written pieces so this one is printed in full.*

Hello VA Birders,

This morning started out quiet so I didn't expect much excitement. Our regulars, as well as a few migrants, were here. Yellow-rumped Warbler, several Blackpoll Warblers and a couple of Red-eyed Vireos. I had places to go, so I turned away from the windows....just as a bird flew into the yard. I looked back....Wilson's Warbler. Hmmm.... Well, maybe I'll watch for a few more minutes. What's that? American Redstart, female. First female that I've seen this year. Nice. And there, a Magnolia Warbler, too. But then there is movement on the ground on the right side of the garden...

Fox, a BABY fox! And another! And a big fox! Mama? And a third baby fox! Omigosh, look at them! Whoever invented the word adorable must

have been watching baby foxes! You may recall that I've mentioned "our" foxes hunting in our yard every morning, chasing and occasionally catching, squirrels. Well, it looks like their kits have "fledged" and they are ready to learn how to hunt. Except that, from what I can see, all that they wanted to do was play and frisk about and bite each other's ears and tails. Mama and papa have their paws full with that trio. The tykes are tiny, perhaps 12" from nose to tail. I could hold one in one hand. Tiny, but energetic. They were rough housing and exploring our yard and the woods. One pranced through the middle of our garden, little tail bouncing in the air, ears perked up, causing us to squeal and to oooo and ahhhhh! New little foxes. Pretty damn neat!

But I had places to go, didn't I? So I began to turn away again...and heard Cedar Waxwings. I looked up to the Tulip Poplar to count waxwings and another bird flew into the Tupelo tree...just a Modoc...so? Wait. Look Again. Hot dog! Yellow-billed cuckoo, right in front of me, in the sun giving good looks.

He watched me. I watched him.

"Remember me?" he said.

"Yes, I remember you. You're the bird that got me started with all this bird craziness many, many years ago."

"So," he said, eyeing my binoculars, "I see you're still at it."

"Yeah, and I still have that field guide that I bought to figure out who you were and what your name was. Thirty years is a long time....It sure is good to see you again."

"Same here," he said.

And with a wink, off he flew. He had places to go.

It was a new and an old kind of morning.

*Lori Markoff, Vienna, Fairfax County*

## BIRD JOKE

A crowd is waiting for the flight to load and when it is finally called, two Turkey Vultures rush to the front of the line both carrying a dead racoon under each arm. The attendant stops them and says, "Sorry, folks, only one carrion per passenger."

## SPRING BIRD COUNT

As two of the territory results have not been received it is not possible to compile a final chart at this time.

## BIRD OF THE MONTH

### Rose-breasted Grosbeak By Bill Holcombe

Reports of the beautiful Rose-breasted Grosbeak seem to have been more frequent this spring both in our area and in the Virginia report so it seems like a good time to focus on this bird. We tend to see the bird in late April and Marilyn Zeigler's visitor on April 20 moved the early date on this bird back one day. They are passing through tidewater Virginia from then until mid May as they head for their breeding grounds farther north or maybe to the Virginia mountains. If you are lucky enough to have one choose your feeder for building some migrating strength you may have him for two or three days.

Grosbeaks are members of the very large finch family of birds and the common species name refers to the large heavy bill, well adapted to cracking open seeds. The Rose-breasted Grosbeak is the eastern counterpart of the western Black-headed Grosbeak and where the species territories overlap, inter-breeding is not rare.

Our bird is a solidly built 7 to 8½- inch bird with a twelve-inch wing span. The male has a black head, throat and upper parts with bright white under parts and a triangle of bright rose splashed across the breast. It has rosy wing linings and white wing patches. The bill is white or straw colored. The female is dark, buffy brown above with white under parts streaked like a sparrow. It has pale yellow wing linings and two broad white wing bars and a white line over brown eyes. The male sings an exquisitely beautiful song, a long, continuous robin-like carol and may even sing while sitting on the nest. The female's song is similar but much softer. Mates seem affectionate and sometimes touch bills in courtship.

These birds arrive in the U.S. and Canada from Mexico and Central America in May. They nest across southern Canada and the United States from North Dakota to Kansas and Missouri and through eastern Tennessee into the North Carolina mountains and in parts of Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York. They nest in second growth woods, borders of swamps, dense thickets and in gardens

and parks of mall towns.

The male sometimes selects the nesting site and usually helps in the construction of the nest of small sticks and twigs lined with soft grasses and sometimes horse hair all loosely woven together. An average of four eggs is laid May through July. These are greenish or bluish and blotched with brown. Both birds share the incubation that lasts 12-13 days and the birds fly in about 15 days.

The birds tend to feed frequently in trees where they eat buds of elms, catalpa, and beech and blossoms of hickory and beech. They also consume large quantities of insects that inhabit those trees.

There are parts of the Dismal Swamp and locations in the Blue Ridge where birders go to see these birds in May. However, if you are really lucky and hang your sun flower seed feeders in the right place they just might choose your place to take a break in their migrating journey. They have stopped off in Marilyn Zeigler's yard several times.