



THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

Volume 26, Number 7

July - August 2002

NEXT MEETING

The Williamsburg Bird Club next meets on September 18 at 7:30 in Room 117 of Millington Hall on the William & Mary Campus. Program Director Dan Cristol has arranged a wonderful program to open the new year of birding. Bill Williams has been walking the Green Spring Nature Trail virtually every week since the trail opened five years ago, most of the time at about the same time of day. The resulting story is a vivid description of the opportunities that the Trail has offered and of the changes that have occurred as further development took place. This will be a story that Williamsburg birders will not want to miss.

RUTH BECK LEADS US TO CRANEY ISLAND AUGUST 24

While no one can guarantee the outcome of a field trip, it is a fact that over the last several years most of these trips have been outstanding. For the unfamiliar, Craney Island is a man-made peninsula of dredging-fill that juts into the Chesapeake Bay from Portsmouth. By persistence, determination and guts Ruth Beck was responsible for its developing into protected nesting sites for shore birds. The location made it a natural stop over for birds migrating along the coast. While there is no guaranteeing the presence of any of these, we have come to expect such birds as Black-necked Stilts, American Avocets, Gull-billed Terns, Black Skimmers, Wilson's Phalarope, plovers, dowitchers, terns, plus a variety of sandpipers and gulls. With a little luck, you may leave being able to distinguish the Least, the Western and the Semipalmated Sandpipers. We've also had

occasions to see Horned Lark and Marbled Godwit.

We have frequently enjoyed breezy, mosquito-free days but visitors should be prepared for those creatures. Long pants, long sleeved shirts, hats and repellent are good precautions. You should also bring a lunch and a beverage. We will meet in front of Wild Birds Unlimited in the Monticello Shipping Center to consolidate cars, and should be on our way by 7:30 a.m. and back 1:30 - 2:00.

A LOOK AT LAST YEAR'S CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

(As all inputs are now made by computer, the results are published 6 months earlier than before and in a more useful form. Some of the facts and statistics are quite interesting. Ed.)

Overall View

There were 1,936 counts in this 102nd Christmas Bird Count, a new record, with 307 counts in Canada, 1,577 in the U.S. and 52 in the Caribbean, Latin America and Pacific Islands. Those figures include 56 new counts and include a pelagic count from a research vessel operating between South America and Antarctica. These counts were supported by 56,129 observers, (another new record) who reported 51,908, 813 birds from 657 countable species. Those actual bird counts represent just an average year of the count. This is explained by a generally mild winter over most of the count area. It is severe weather that concentrates species and sends them to new territories.

Seventy two reported 150 species or more. At the top of the list is Mad Island Marsh, Texas (233

species) and Santa Barbara, California (206 species). The vast majority of the over 150-species counts were in California and Texas or other warmer climates. Of special interest to us are the exceptions to that along the Atlantic flyway; Cape May, New Jersey (167 species), Southport, Oak Islands, North Carolina (166 species), Wilmington, N.C. (160 species), Cape Charles, Virginia (156 species), and Hilton Head, South Carolina (151 species). Our Average is 112 species.

Virginia and District of Columbia

The 41 Virginia counts were almost a copy of the previous year in terms of participants and efforts, except for the cancellation of the Dismal Swamp count due to torrential rains. The only new species was the Franklin's Gull seen at Newport News. Two other unusual sightings are under review: the Clay Colored Sparrow at Manassas and the Henslow's Sparrow at The Plains. Other rarities include a Clark's Grebe at Little Creek, a Broad-winged Hawk at Washington, D.C., a Piping Plover at Chincoteague and a Mew Gull on the Bay-Bridge Tunnel.

There have been some startling increases in the number of sightings and also in number of individuals for several species. A good data-base for these observations is provided by the many counts in this area that are stable and of long standing. For example, the Lesser Black-backed Gull, first seen at Little Creek in 1974 had 91 in the 2001 count, up 53 % from the previous total of 36 birds in the '96 and '98 counts. Another is the increase in hummingbirds, four reported this year: one identified as Hummingbird species in Washington D.C., a banded and identified Rufous in Loudon and a *selasphorus* species at Fort Belvoir and Williamsburg. (It was Tom Armour's sighting in Williamsburg that was later banded and identified as Rufous.) Record high numbers were chalked up for Pied-billed Grebe, Double-crested Cormorant, Canada Goose, Bald Eagle, Red-tailed Hawk, Black and Turkey Vultures and Peregrine Falcon. All of the woodpecker counts were high, including a 396 count of Downys, the highest in Virginia history. The sixty percent increase in Northern Gannets from the all-time high set in 2000 was totally unexpected. A dismaying surge in the number of Mute Swans

was also noted. The backyard birds represented by the Carolina Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, White-breasted Nuthatch, Northern Mockingbird and Northern Cardinal were all up significantly.

Birds missing from this year's count were the Eider ducks, the Common Moorhen (missing for the second year) and the Green Heron (missing for the first time in six years). The White-eyed Vireo (missing for the first time in ten years) and other no shows were Cape May Warbler, Ovenbird and Yellow-breasted Chat. The Logger-head Shrike with 16 birds counted is barely holding its own with an average of the last six years between 11 and 21.

In the eye-blinding U.S. listing of the highest count for each species were these Virginia listings: Canvasback 10,704, Williamsburg; Carolina Chickadee, 1,728, Fort Belvoir; Carolina Wren, Fort Belvoir 542; Song Sparrow, 1,513, Fort Belvoir.

Here are some mind boggling numbers from individual one-day counts: Common Loons, 843, Wilmington, N.C.; Northern Gannet, 22,000 Bodie Island, N.C.; Tundra Swan, 38,923 Pettigrew S.P., N.C.; Horned Lark, 11,397, Barr Lake, Colorado; Tufted Titmouse, 1,233, Concord, Mass.; Brown Creeper, 295, Seneca, Maryland; Golden-crowned Kinglet, 1,584, Airlie, Oregon; Ruby-crowned Kinglet, 1,966, Point Reyes, California; American Robin, 300,000 Taney County, Missouri.

FAREWELL TO JOY ARCHER

Our long time birding companion, past president, past secretary, past field trip coordinator and past memorable friend to many in the Williamsburg Bird Club died the evening of July 4. A memorial service packed with friends was held at the Unitarian Church on July 11. Many of those who responded to the invitation to speak about Joy had been members of the large support group organized to see her through this devastating illness. Virtually every one of them recounted some story of Joy's devotion to the welfare of birds and their habitat.

Joy went at birding the same way that she went at most of her activities. She worked hard to develop the skills needed to become very good at it. And

she worked to share those skills that she developed with anyone interested in doing so. Her pleasure and enthusiasm at being out in the field was obvious to anyone birding with her and that spirit was wonderfully contagious. Her rock-solid, positive outlook, her willingness to always do more than her share of the work, the fun that she made any birding trip, the joy of being with Joy will all be sorely missed.

WHOOPING CRANE SUCCESS

(Tom Armour passed along this story from the Florida Palm Beach Post and we'll try to pass along the essence of it. Ed.)

Whooping Cranes, the tallest bird in North America, once dwelled from mid-Canada to Mexico. By 1937 only 15 birds survived in a remnant flock that wintered on the Texas coast and nested in the Canadian wilderness. Today, counting both wild and captive birds, the population has reached nearly 400. The Canada-Texas flock has grown to 173. 110 live in captivity in various research stations. A non-migrating flock of 95 live in central Florida and were raised in captivity — all but one, and that is part of this story.

The Bird Birds of both sexes appear similar with the male somewhat larger and averaging 16 lb and can exceed 60 inches in height. They are all white with black wing tips, black mustachial markings on the face, bright red bare skin on the top of the head, white eyes, long black legs, medium long bill shading from dark tips to dull orange. Necks are long and tails are short. In flight the neck stretches forward and slightly downward and legs trail straight out behind. The booming whoop from which the bird gets its name can be heard for several miles and is produced by a five-foot long trachea which folds into loops in the breastbone creating a French horn effect.

First Success Story Starting from the population low point of 1937, scientists began a strong protection plan for the Texas wintering grounds. They widely advertised the plight of the bird and efforts to save it along its migratory route and started searching for the Canadian nesting ground, not found until June 1954. Starting in 1967 scientists began removing one of the pair of eggs

usually laid in each nest having noted that only one chick was produced from each nest. These eggs were taken to the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and hatched there until 1974 when the resulting population of cranes began producing their own eggs. Starting in 1975 the eggs were placed in the nests of Sandhill Cranes in the Idaho, Grays Lake National Wildlife Refuge. While this did eventually introduce Whooping Cranes into the Sandhill flocks, the goal of producing another self-sustaining flock of Whoopers ended when the Idaho group died out this year.

Recent Successes Last fall, six Whooping Cranes raised in captivity flew 1,200 miles from Wisconsin to a wildlife refuge north of Tampa Bay, Florida, led by ultra light planes playing the role of a leading mom. This spring five of the birds flew back to Wisconsin on their own, proof that the cranes can be taught to migrate.

And now there is Lucky, the first crane born and raised out of the non-migrating population of 95 Whooping Cranes living in and around the Kissimmee Prairie in Central Florida. That population began with captive raised birds in 1993 and biologists augment it each year with birds from Wisconsin, Maryland, Texas and Alberta, Canada. However, it was not until 1999 that two pairs of cranes made the first spontaneous nesting effort, the first time in over a century that anyone had seen Whooping Cranes nesting in the U.S. One of the nests was flooded out and predators destroyed the other. In 2000 a nest produced two chicks both of which died. The cranes made two nests last year but one couple was infertile and the other abandoned their nest. This year the Kissimmee Whoopers made seven nests and it was one of those seven that last March produced Lucky, the first Whooping Crane created and raised by his parents in the United States since the late 19th century. And that was far from easy. Lucky's father stomped an attacking eagle so severely that it was hospitalized and both parents participated in driving off dogs that were after Lucky. By July Lucky could fly as well as his parents, doing much to assure his survival.

While the Whooping Cranes are central to this story, knowing how and why the scientists persist in the face of such adversity and slow progress

would be another story worth knowing.

GOLF COURSE BIRD CENSUS

(Dan Cristol was a major organizer of this spring's effort to take bird censuses of local golf courses as part of a national study designed to study the effect of golf courses on bird populations. Here is his preliminary report. Ed.)

Over 120 volunteers around the state censused 75 golf courses. Data are still being analyzed, but we saw a lot of birds on the courses and had 27 non-golf course areas to compare them to. Results will be presented at a future club meeting. The effort garnered national attention as an Associated Press article was printed in papers from Florida to Colorado and the story was picked up by USA Today. That paper ran a picture of Josh LeClerc and Dan Cristol demonstrating the effort by posing on the Golden Horseshoe course as census takers. There was even a story on the nightly news broadcast out of Richmond.

Williamsburg birders made a HUGE contribution with the following members and friends participating: Hugh Beard and Emilio Bracalante did Kiskiack and Williamsburg Country Club, Ruth Beck and Lee Schuster did Royal New Kent, Golden Horseshoe and Stonehouse; Dan Cristol and Bill Williams did Bide-a-wee, David DesRoachers and Josh LeClerc did Riverfront, Carol Goff and Kingsley Stevens did the Marsh Hawk course at Ford's Colony, Bill Holcombe and John McDowell did Two Rivers; Carolyn Lowe and Bill McCrary did Holly Oaks and Deer Cove; Paul and Carol McAllister did two courses at Langley; Alex and Mike Minarik did Colonial and Williamsburg National; Dot Silsby did the Deer Run courses at Newport News Park; Gene Sankey and Josh LeClerc did Suffolk Golf Club; Peggy Roman Waterfield; Clark White, the Copelands and other friends did numerous courses to the south and Alexandra Wilkie and Phil West covered the eastern Shore. In addition, the Vineyards, Rolling Woods, College Woods, West Point Airport, Greensprings Nature trail and other local areas were covered as part of 27 sites to be used as comparison with the golf courses.

Future newsletters will give you much more on this subject.

A "THANK YOU" LETTER

To the Selection Committee for the WBC Student research Grant and all members of the WBC,

I would like to sincerely thank you for generously awarding me the 2002 WBC Student Research Grant. The additional funding will be of tremendous use to me as I complete my second month of field work on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. Currently, I am monitoring 27 active American Oystercatcher nests on Fisherman Island National Wildlife Refuge and over 50 nests on Metompkin Island. My work will expand on data from the 2001 season and will contribute to the need for site specific information on Oystercatcher distribution and productivity. Most importantly, this research will be in addition to the already existing base of scientific knowledge of American Oystercatchers and will, in turn, contribute to the conservation of the species.

I understand that in return for receiving the WBC research grant, I will give a presentation to the bird club on a future date. I look forward to this and will await additional details. Thank you again for providing me the wonderful start to my career at William and Mary.

Sincerely, Alexandra Wilke

FIELD NOTES FOR JUNE & JULY

(June and July are busy months for all of us and while we didn't get a lot of field note reports, there were some darn interesting ones. Reports are always welcome. Email to bowljack@aol.com or phone Bill Holcombe at 22908057 or mail to 4705 Lady Slipper path, Williamsburg, Va. 23188. Ed.)

Dick Reeves sent this clipping from the New York Times, Metropolitan Diary for June 3:

"Dear Diary,

As an avid Central Park birder, I'm always on the lookout for the unusual. Recently, after two hours of early morning birding, I reluctantly headed from the park when my ears caught the sound of a cellphone ringing. I looked into the bushes where the sound was coming from but saw no one.

Then my eye caught a perky little catbird running through its repertory of bird songs. Knowing that

it is a mimic, I listened carefully, trying to pick out the different songs. I heard it imitate a white-throated sparrow, a house finch, a song sparrow, and then the clear ring of a cellphone! My mouth dropped open in disbelief. I listened again and sure enough heard the catbird repeat bird song, bird song, cellphone and on and on. The little guy made my day. Barbara Saunders”

June 7 – Tom Armour says there is a Yellow-crowned Night heron nesting in Kingsmill with three good-sized young, the first in the 25 years that he has lived there. “Watched three Brown Pelicans fishing the Marina this a.m.”

June 25 – Alex Minarik spots a small bird collecting dog hair from yellow lab Kate’s favorite resting place and it proves to be a Northern Parula Warbler. “Also enjoying a family of Barred Owls flying around my yard.”

June 29 – Alex and Mike joined the VSO trip to Mount Rogers. “Mt. Rogers, the highest point in Virginia, is the annual site of the June VSO field trip. It is a unique habitat in the South, where you can find many of our regular winter feeder birds in the process of breeding. At Grindstone Campground, where most of the participants stay, we saw lots of nesting warblers, including Canada, Magnolia, Black-throated Blues, Hooded and Black & White. Veerys were everywhere. Also saw breeding Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, Juncos, Least Flycatchers and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks. A Junco entertained us at our campsite as it collected Kate’s fur for its nest. On the hike up the mountain we saw breeding Purple Finches, Red-breasted Nuthatches, Black-capped Chickadees, Golden-crowned Kinglets, Winter Wrens, Hermit Thrushes and Alder Flycatchers. One of my biggest thrills was hearing the Brown Creeper song for the first time.” (That convinces me to plan for that trip next June! Ed.)

July 30 – Tom Armour reports that the Royal Terns, “about a hundred,” have returned to the Kingsmill Marina, “to join about 100 Laughing Gulls.”

July 31 – Dan Cristol has several reports: “Summer Tanager feeding on bugs in my compost heap July 20. An earlier census at the Vineyards included Yellow-breasted Chat, Meadowlark, Bobwhite, Cooper’s Hawk and Sharp-shinned Hawk.”

June and July – Grace and Joe Doyle had five birding trips to Camp Peary in June and two in July. The species counts were 6/2 – 68, 6/9 – 63, 6/16 – 60, 6/23 – 57, 6/30 – 58. In July, 7/7 – 67, 7/28 – 52. Skipping the more common year-round birds, those species included: Brown Pelican, Great Egret, Snowy Egret, Green-backed Heron, Mute Swan, Wood Ducks, Mallards, Osprey, Bald Eagle, Wild Turkey, Northern Bobwhite, Clapper Rail, Virginia Rail, Common Tern, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Belted Kingfisher, Red-headed Woodpecker, Eastern Wood-pewee, Acadian Flycatcher, Great-crested Flycatcher, Eastern Kingbird, Tree Swallow, Barn Swallow, Brown-headed Nuthatch, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Wood Thrush, Gray Catbird, Brown Thrasher, Cedar Waxwing, White-eyed Vireo, Red-eyed Vireo, Northern Parula, Yellow-throated Warbler, Pine Warbler, Prairie Warbler, Ovenbird, Common Yellowthroat, Hooded Warbler, Yellow-breasted Chat, Summer Tanager, Scarlet Tanager, Blue Grosbeak, Indigo Bunting, Chipping Sparrow, Field Sparrow, Brown-headed Cowbird and Orchard Oriole.

JAMESTOWN IS. DEVELOPMENT REVIEW

Development plans for Jamestown Island are likely of interest to Club members who make use of this favorite birding site. The National Park Service and the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities have drafted a development plan, Jamestown Project Development Concept Plan/Environmental Impact Statement. They invite comment on this plan at a public meetings to be held September 12, at 3:00 p.m. and 9 p.m. at the Williamsburg Community Building, 401 North Boundary St. You can also file your comments at www.nps.gov/colo, or mail to Alec Gould, Superintendent, Colonial National Park, P.O. Box 210, Yorktown, Virginia 23690. The document is available for review at the Yorktown Visitor Center and at Jamestown Rediscovery Center. It is also available at most area libraries, including the Williamsburg Regional Library and the Swem Library.