



# THE FLYER

NEWSLETTER OF THE WILLIAMSBURG BIRD CLUB

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## NEXT MEETING MARCH 19

The Williamsburg Bird Club will next meet at 7:30 p.m. in Room 117 of Millington Hall on the Campus of William and Mary. Ruth Beck and Dan Cristol will conduct an orientation session prior to going out and searching for the Barred and Great Horned Owls that we might be able to "hoot up." We haven't done this in a while but many of us will remember some interesting evenings along Treasure Island Road when some patience produced a barrage of owls coming towards us and returning our calls.

## MARCH FIELD TRIP: THE VINEYARDS

Randy Coleman will lead the field trip on Saturday, March 22 with a search of the varied habitat at the Vineyards. We will meet in the parking lot of the Vineyards Club House at 7:30. A variety of ducks have been spotted in the pond over the past few months and the woods and thickets offer other hopeful possibilities. To get to the Vineyards take 199 to the first light east of Jamestown Road. Take a right-hand turn if coming from Jamestown Road and a left-hand turn if coming from the Kingsmill direction. Take the first left-hand turn onto Lake Powell Road. Continue until you come to the Vineyards and make a left-hand turn at the second entrance. At the T dead-end turn right and proceed to the club house that is identified by a sign.

Unfortunately, the February trip to Hog Island was washed out by the steady rain.

## FIELD NOTES FOR FEBRUARY

The ice on February 17 and 18 was a real boon to feeder watchers as the hungry birds swarmed to them, including some seldom seen on those feeders, such as Bluebirds, Hermit Thrush, Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, Brown Thrashers and far more Yellow-rumped and Pine Warblers than is usual. The weather also produced some interesting reports of congregations of birds feeding along the Colonial Parkway on the grass strips where the traffic had melted the ice. Bill Williams saw twelve Fox Sparrows along the road Sunday evening the 16<sup>th</sup> and mentioned this to Mitchell Bird. He checked out the Parkway Monday evening and counted 110 Fox Sparrows between Jamestown Island and Glebe Gut, by which time he was tired of counting Fox Sparrows! On Tuesday when Brian Taber checked the road he found more than 120 Fox Sparrows! After the storm a Hooded Merganser and a Great Blue Heron were seen sharing the 199-Route 5 pond with the usual crowd of Canada Geese.

In the middle of the month Jeanne Frey was good enough to send a survey of birds in the area surrounding her house "in beautiful Surrey County." She had only the second report of a Purple Finch that I've received this winter and included Brown Creeper, Hermit Thrush, Barred Owl and Red-tailed Hawk with the usual "suspects" of Gold Finches, Juncos, White-breasted Nuthatches, Chickadees, Titmice, Carolina Wrens, and the woodpeckers: Red-bellied, Downy and Pileated.

And with apologies to Hugh beard for missing his interesting report last month — Mid-January Hugh took his class to Felgates on the York River and while scoping out the large array of Ruddy Ducks, Canvasbacks and Lesser Scaup they found a large black duck sticking out like a sore thumb. It turned out to be a female White-winged Scoter and only the tenth sighting in the club's 26-year history.

Feb. 2 – Because of the terrible weather, Grace and Joe Doyle only got to walk the Camp Peary trails this one Sunday. Along with the usual residents they found 32 Tundra Swans, 30 Wood Ducks, 100 Ring-necked Ducks, Bufflehead, Hooded Merganser, Ruddy Duck, Bald Eagle, Belted Kingfisher, Red-headed Woodpecker, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Brown-headed Nuthatch, Brown Creeper, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Hermit Thrush, Brown Thrasher, Yellow-rumped and Pine Warblers, 150 White-throated Sparrows and Brown-headed Cowbird.

February 6 – Tom Armour reports Great Cormorant and Goldeneye at the Kingsmill Marina and a Belted Kingfisher at the Vineyards.

February 7 – Bill Holcombe sees a pair of Coot at the Kingsmill Marina on a rainy morning.

February 8 – Bill Williams at College Creek sees a Lesser Black-backed Gull and a Horned Lark.

February 9 – Brian Taber started his 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Hawk watch on the James River near College Creek. A Cooper's Hawk was the first to cross the river followed by seven Turkey Vultures and then an Osprey. The Club's early date is February 6.

February 9 – On the bridge over the swamp on the Greensprings Nature Trail Bill Holcombe had a welcome five minutes in which he saw a Golden-crowned Kinglet, a Swamp Sparrow, a pair of Brown-headed Nuthatches, a Brown Creeper and a Red-headed Woodpecker. Arriving back home he found his first this winter Purple Finches, male and female, in nearby trees.

February 11 – Barbara Luck was pleased and excited to find the second Cedar Waxwings that she had ever seen clustered in a nearby berry bush.

Feb. 14 – New member, Sylvia Shirley reported a very pleasant morning over coffee watching Finches, Juncos, Towhees, Cardinals, Thrashers, and Chickadees that ended with getting a good

picture of a pair of Red-shouldered Hawks sitting in a nearby tree.

February 15 – Eleanor Young spent a cold, wet morning on the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel Islands where she was rewarded with Surf Scoter, Black Scoters and the more elusive White-winged Scoter, Harlequin Duck, Lesser Scaup, all three mergansers (Red-breasted, Hooded, and Common) Gannets, Buffleheads, Ruddy Turnstones and Purple Sandpipers.

February 15 – Ruth and Sherwin Beck spent a wonderful morning in comfortable chairs with plenty of coffee watching what may have been the "mother" of all back Yard Bird Counts with this list: two Great Blue Herons, two Wood Ducks, Hooded Merganser, Red-breasted merganser, Bald Eagle, three Mourning Doves, three Red-bellied Woodpeckers, two Northern Flickers, three Carolina Chickadees, three White-breasted Nuthatches, two Carolina Wrens, five Eastern Bluebirds, two Hermit Thrush, three Pine Warblers, eight Rufous-sided Towhees, three Fox Sparrows, 35 White-throated Sparrows, 40 Dark-eyed Juncos, Red-winged Blackbird, two Rusty Blackbirds, eight Brown-headed Cowbirds, two Purple Finches, House Finch, and 75 Goldfinches.

February 17 – Chuck Rend spots a Meadowlark on Ironbound Road.

February 23 – Alex Minarik reports Fox Sparrow and Brown Creeper at home and Red-headed Woodpeckers, Hairy Woodpecker, Brown-headed Nuthatches, Black Ducks and Swamp Sparrows at Jamestown Island and a Northern Harrier cruising over the marsh as she left.

February 28 – Tom McCary is amazed to find a Gray Catbird on his feeder and later in the day sees two Horned Grebes, two Bufflehead and a Red-throated Loon at Felgate's Creek on the York River.

*Thanks for the extra calls and notes. Reports are essential for a good Field Note survey. 229-8057 or Bowljack@aol.com or 4705 Lady Slipper Path, Williamsburg, Va. 23185 — Ed.*

## **CHECKING THE EMAIL BIRDLIST FOR VIRGINIA**

February 4 – 8 The sea-going Dovkie was

scattered along the Outerbank's Beaches from Nags Head to Buxton and nearby birders flocked at the chance to "life-list" the bird.

February 11 – First of the season Osprey in Arlington.

February 12 – Black-headed Grosbeak reported in Elizabeth City, N.C.

February 13 – Common Mergansers found in Arlington.

February 15 – Red-necked Grebe in Fairfax County.

February 16 – Driving to Williamsburg, a birder reports Bald Eagle at the intersection of I-64 and Rte. 295, Red-tailed Hawks along the road and an Osprey as he entered Williamsburg.

February 16 – We didn't have all of the Fox Sparrows. A report from South Boston counts 14 in the backyard.

February 18 – Four Razorbills seen at Fort Story in Virginia Beach.

February 18 – Red-necked Grebe and red Phalarope seen on Nags Head Beach.

February 19 – Merlin in Springfield.

February 23 – Highland County trip produces Golden Eagle, Bald Eagle, Common Raven, Horned Lark and American tree Sparrow.

February 24 – Black-headed Gull spotted in a flock of Bonaparte's Gulls off of Fort Story.

February 26 – Two Short-eared Owls at Zion's Crossroad off of Rt.64 but no indication of where to find them there.

February 27 – Red-necked Grebe at Silver Lake in Rockingham County.

February 28 – Red-necked Grebe, changing to breeding plumage in Occoquan.

Virginia Birder Ned Brinkley thinks that we may be in for a wave of Red-necked Grebes as they are being reported both north and south of us in larger numbers than usual.

## **MORE COMMENT ON THE OUTER BANKS DOVEKIE**

**By Bryan Patteson**

We are experiencing a significant incursion of

Dovekies here on the Outer banks, the likes of which has not been seen for many years. Last Friday at least four birds were picked up alive between Oregon Inlet and Hatteras Inlet, apparently put ashore by what was not a particularly powerful low pressure system. A number of others have been spotted on the sea since, so it is likely that the numbers off shore exceed anything that we have witnessed in recent years. There have also been many Razorbills seen from shore, and I received a good report of a Puffin seen by a local charter boat captain at sea several miles south of Hatteras. While Razorbill and Puffin are both regular winter visitors at least south to Virginia, on an annual basis, Dovekies are not. In fact, it has been more than five years since we have seen more than a handful of Dovekies on any of our winter pelagic trips from here.

*Bryan Patteson has spoken at club meetings several times and is a promoter of offshore pelagic birding trips from Virginia Beach and Hatteras Island.*

## **MIGRANTS ARRIVING IN MARCH**

As Spring comes on our winter residents will be moving on to more northern climates and the warm weather birds will be arriving or passing through. Grace Doyle has already seen large flocks of Trumpeter Swans heading north and three reports of returning Osprey here have already been received.

For over twenty years Bill Sheehan recorded early arrival dates and late departure dates that are noted in the club's Annotated List. We try to keep that list up to date. If you see any of our March arrivals sooner than the listed early dates, please call Bill Holcombe, 229-8057.

Birds with March arrival dates: Royal Tern, March 6; Cattle Egret and Purple Martin, March 9; Northern Rough-winged Swallow, March 10; Barn Swallow, March 11; Yellow-throated Warbler, March 14; Louisiana Waterthrush March 16; Yellow-crowned Night Heron, March 18; Black-bellied Plover, March 18; Oven Bird, March 20; Black and White Warbler, March 26; Caspian Tern, March 27; Prairie Warbler, March 30; Bank Swallow, Northern Parula, March 31. Phoebe and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers have been

recorded every month of the year but both of these birds have a spring-time returning population and we like to hear reports. The first Ruby-throated Hummingbird date is April 4 so you might think of getting your feeders up soon and see what shows up.

## **TIME TO CONSIDER A DUES INCREASE**

The membership dues for the Williamsburg Bird Club were last modestly increased in 1994. While inflation has been well under control, ten years of 2 to 4 percent annual increases have an effect. If we are to live with increases only every ten years, the Executive Board recommends that, we increase the Club's annual dues in 2004 as follows to ensure the Club's financial security:

	<u>Current Dues</u>	<u>New Dues</u>
Individual	\$10.00	\$15.00
Family	\$15.00	\$25.00
Patron	\$25.00	\$35.00
Student	\$5.00	\$5.00

**The members of the Club will be asked to vote on this recommendation at the regular meeting on March 19. The Executive Committee asks for your support.**

## **BIRD OF THE MONTH**

### **The Red-necked Grebe by Bill Holcombe**

If Ned Brinkley is right about the possibility of seeing an incursion of Red-necked Grebes in this general area, perhaps this would be a good time for most of us who have never seen the bird to prepare ourselves for the encounter. Our Bird Club Annotated List calls this bird a rare migrant between January 11 and April 11 seen along the York River to Yorktown Beach.

Grebes form a family of 20 species world-wide, of which six inhabit North America. While they were once thought to be related to the Loons, in fact, they have no known relatives. They are swimming

and diving birds with lobed toes which form a partial web, and are said to be one of the most perfect of all birds in terms of their adaptation to life on the water. Grebes dive and swim rapidly below the surface, normally reaching depths of 20 feet in dives that last about 30 seconds. The Red-necked Grebe as been measured in dives lasting almost twice that long. A truly frightened grebe may swim underwater until it reaches water plants in the shallows and then rises only enough to expose its bill and eyes.

This bird can feed, sleep, and court on water and also carry their downy chicks about riding on their backs. The chicks do not dive well until they are several weeks old and both parents share carrying them about, even feeding them while they ride on the parent's backs.

Grebes have rich, thick, lustrous plumage and they were once widely hunted for the millinery trade where the skins wound up decorating women's hats. President Theodore Roosevelt was so put off by this slaughter in the northwest that we set aside Malheur and Klamath lakes in Oregon as bird reservations.

While perfectly adapted to the water, grebes are weak flyers and move with difficulty on land. Even with their weak flying they still migrate over long distances and almost always at night, especially moon-lit nights. When migrating along the ocean-front, they frequently continue their journey during the day by swimming along the shore.

The Red-necked Grebe is the second largest North American grebe, the Western Grebe being the largest. But it is by far the largest of the grebes that we are likely to see in our area. It is three times the weight of the Pied Billed Grebe and 50 per cent larger than the Horned Grebe. Sexes are outwardly similar, 17 to 22 inches long with a wingspan of 30 to 32 inches. In its winter plumage the sides of head and throat are white and the neck and body are grayish. In breeding plumage the body is gray above and white below; top of head is black and cheeks nearly white; neck is dark red; bill is straight and black with yellow at the base; feather tufts on the head are quite prominent and the eyes are brown. In flight they have prominent white patches on the front and rear of the wings. They are usually silent in spring migration and

courtship but both sexes utter courtship notes that begin with a series of loon-like wails ending in a staccato, chattering trill. There is a resemblance to a horse's whinny. They migrate alone or in loose associations, traveling inland by night and along the coast by day. In the winter they are often alone just beyond the breakers.

The Red-throated Grebe feeds by diving for small fish, shrimp, crayfish, tadpoles, crustaceans and aquatic insects but also eats flies, wasps, ants and beetles. It also has the peculiarity of eating feathers plucked from its own breast and feeds these to the young as well.

It nests in watery marshes and marshy lakes ranging across Canada and the northern tier of states in the U.S. They are usually solitary nesters but sometimes form loose gatherings. Nests are built by both sexes of marsh grasses, reeds, and rushes forming an inconspicuous mass usually floating on water two to three feet deep and attached to upright plants. Three to six light blue unmarked eggs are laid. Both parents have the incubation patch and share the incubation which lasts 22 to 23 days. Researchers have found chicks as much as 72 days old that have not flown but the age at first flight is not known. Only one nesting is raised per season. The birds winter along both coasts and more rarely from the Great Lakes area south to Tennessee.

The far more numerous Pied-billed Grebe is quite common in our area and may be found on any nearby body of water. The Horned Grebe is quite plentiful along the York River and that is where you are most likely to find the Red-necked Grebe.

*Reference: The Audubon Encyclopedia of North American Birds by John Terres*