



# The Flyer

## Newsletter of the Williamsburg Bird Club

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May 2018

### PRESIDENT'S CORNER

By Cheryl Jacobson



#### The Joy of Birds/Spring and Breeding Bird Atlasing in The Year of the Bird

Engaging in the Breeding Bird Atlas has been rewarding, and to me it seems to be going back to the basics- the joy of watching birds in nature and becoming more aware of their behaviors, when there is little focus on counting birds, so this approach is more relaxed and slower paced. I think this excerpt from *The Joy of Bird Watching* by Alan Davies and Ruth Miller expresses the joy that can come from this approach. "And once you start looking out for birds, you'll notice something else too. You'll notice that you've forgotten whatever it was you were worrying about; that important meeting suddenly isn't so daunting, or perhaps your tired feet don't ache any more. Because birdwatching is good for you. While you're concentrating on seeing and enjoying birds, you're not thinking about anything else. It's absorbing without being taxing and stimulating without wearing you out. If you've just watched a blackbird foraging for worms amongst the leaf litter, you can't help but smile inside and your day is already better for it."

As an update on the Atlas, I first want to thank everyone who is helping on this important project! Sixteen people attended the training conducted by Ashley Peele, Atlas Coordinator, on April 13, 2018, and another four from our club attended in Hampton Roads the following day.



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### PROGRAMS

#### W&M ANDREWS HALL, ROOM 101

By Judy Jones

#### Birding Proficiency by Susan Powell May 16th @ 7pm

As a dedicated birder and well-respected authority on all things avian, Susan will be sharing with us ways to improve our birding proficiency as well as a quick review on bird markings and ways to improve our identification skills. Come join us on May 16th for this opportunity to make your birding experiences even more successful.

#### Future Williamsburg Bird Club (WBC) Programs

##### September 19th:

Although June, July, and August are months in which we don't meet, we'll return with a swagger in the Fall. Please join us in September and meet the kids we've sponsored to attend Nature Camp. After their brief presentations, Dave Youker will be our guest speaker.

##### October 17th:

In October, Dr. John Swaddle of the College of William and Mary will speak to environmental stressors and their impact on avian evolution. It should be a fascinating evening.

##### November 21st:

Then, in November, we'll welcome back Dr. Fletcher Smith. Fletcher works with a diversity of bird species throughout the western hemisphere, following migrants from their breeding to winter grounds. His current research projects include work with Whimbrels, Red Knots, Marsh Sparrows, and neo-tropical migrants. In addition, he also conducts breeding bird surveys, manages the Saw-whet Owl banding program, and is the Center's primary rocket netter. He'll be sharing with us his research regarding "Birding Above the Arctic Circle".

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## Why is the VABBA2 so important?

Over 25 years have passed since the completion of the first atlas in VA, and many environmental changes have occurred. Climate change and other anthropogenic causes are rapidly changing the conditions that birds and other wildlife must cope with in order to survive. Data collected for the VABBA2 can tell us when birds are forming territories, building nests, laying eggs, fledging chicks, as well as their distributions among different habitats throughout the state. Atlas surveys can assess how bird communities are responding to these changes. For example, two points already learned from the survey is the Northern Bobwhite breeding population in Virginia continues to decline. A breeding population on the rise is that of the Common Merganser. Depending on funding, at the end of the survey in three years, a final report could detail some very interesting and critical information.

Some newly confirmed breeding species from the first season are: Mississippi Kite, Magnolia Warbler, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, and Common Merganser. From the second season: Anhinga, Eastern Whip-poor-will, Mourning Warbler, Wilson's Plover, Brown Creeper, and Swamp Sparrow.

I want to especially thank the following people who have signed up for our assigned priority blocks for this third year: Toano SE (Jan Lockwood and Rose Ryan), Walkers SE (Shan Gil and Les Lawrence), Providence Forge SE (Rexanne Bruno), Roxbury SE (Bill Williams), Brandon SE (Andy Hawkins and Geoff Giles), Disputanta North SE (Daphne Cole), Prince George SE (Daphne Cole), Surry SE (Shirley Devan), Margarettsville CE (Jason Strickland), and I have signed up for Turnstall SE and New Kent SE. Also, thanks to Carlton Noll who has been logging many breeding bird ebird hours in the above listed blocks.

People have been working in teams and report having lots of fun. One person reported to me that it is very relaxing and like becoming one with the bird. Shan Gil joined me on a recent survey of my two areas. We found Horned Larks, a new species for Shan, who took some great photos (see Shan's photo below). I will be scheduling small group trips to some of the blocks to support continued learning.



### How does a Breeding Bird Walk differ from WBC other walks?

Jan Lockwood attended the Hampton Roads training which included a walk. This is what she reported to me: The emphasis was on slowing down and REALLY observing the birds rather than creating a list of sightings. It worked. Dave

Youker led discussion on the birds we saw and what breeding code (if any) should be used.

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For instance, we saw a EUST (European Starling) going in and out of a hole in a tree - it wasn't carrying nesting material, or food, or bringing out fecal sacs. A second EUST flew in and entered the hole, the first flew off. Since we had no way of knowing what was inside the hole, it was concluded that the appropriate code would be Visiting a Possible Nest Site. Another instance - a female NOCA (Northern Cardinal) was sitting on a nest in a shrub beside the trail. The male was flying above us and obviously disturbed by our presence. Again, we had no way of knowing what was in the nest (she didn't get up and leave the nest, she wasn't turning eggs). It was concluded that Occupied Nest (Confirmed) would be the most appropriate code rather than a higher one (Anyway, confirmed is Confirmed!)

We had a singing Northern Mockingbird - that was given an S code (Singing). Two Brown Thrashers were foraging on the ground, but there was no sign of courtship, no way of determining the sex of either bird, so we couldn't be sure they were a breeding pair.

So, don't miss out on the fun!! It is not too late to become involved. Join us on upcoming Breeding Bird Atlas walks or field trips. It will benefit birds by adding to an important database and will be good for your mental health and well-being.

This mental health benefit is verified by a study done at the University of Exeter, involving hundreds of people. The study found an increase in the feelings of well-being for those participants who were able to see birds. There was no relationship between the species of birds and mental health, but rather the number of birds that people could see from their windows, in the garden or in their neighborhood.

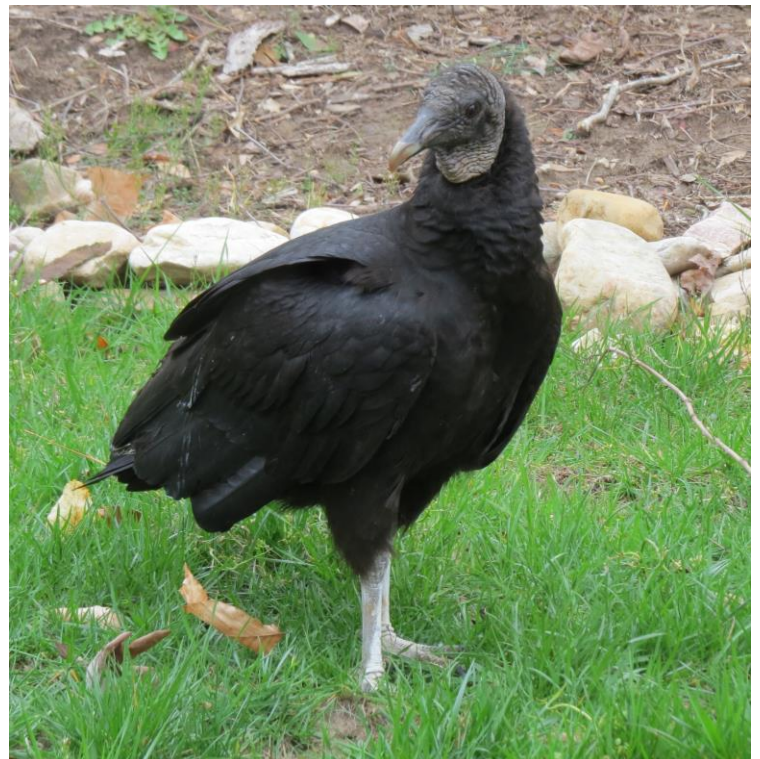
Previous studies have found that the ability of most people to identify different species is low, suggesting that for most people it is interacting with birds, not just specific birds, that provides well-being.

### **Why is collecting bird data important?**

An example is people intervening when data showed a significant decline in the Purple Martin populations (see Cathy Millar's account in the sightings section). Purple Martins are common birds (especially in the Southeast), but their numbers declined by almost 1% per year between 1966 and 2015, resulting in a cumulative decline of 37%, according to the North American Breeding Bird Atlas. Partners in Flight estimates the global breeding population at 7 million with 90% breeding in or migrating through the U.S., 7 % in Mexico, and 3% breeding in Canada. Humans have helped counteract declines somewhat by putting up houses, and people now provide virtually all nest sites for Purple Martins in the East. There is still work to be done. Introduced species such as the European Starling and House Sparrow often take over martin houses and injure or kill eggs and nestlings. Purple Martins are also sensitive to cold snaps; bad weather kills more birds than all other sources of mortality combined. When unseasonably cold temperatures last more than three or four days, the birds starve for lack of insects.

Finally, a program update- You all know how tenacious I have been in trying to schedule Katie Fallon as a speaker. Great news for Katie Fallon...she and her husband are expecting a baby but that means her presentation to the Williamsburg Bird Club will be delayed. In the meantime, I suggest you read her book, *Vulture, the Private Life of an Unloved Bird*. I really enjoyed the book and have a newfound interest in vultures. I especially enjoyed her opening paragraphs and I quote her: "Watching a soaring Turkey Vulture is like meditating. Gently rocking with the breeze, a vulture's flight looks peaceful and elegant. In times of stress, gazing at a vulture overhead is a reminder to glide, to sail, to use the prevailing winds."

So, until next time...Happy Birding in The Year of the Bird.



## VA SOCIETY OF ORNITHOLOGY ANNUAL MEETING CONVENES IN HARRISONBURG MAY 18 - 20, 2018

By Shirley Devan

You won't want to miss this year's exciting meeting in the beautiful mountain and valley region of western Virginia. Plan on finding some of the birds in Virginia's Mountains and Valleys Region that you don't see often and learn more about breeding bird behavior. The field trips will provide great opportunities to see unique high elevation breeding species and support the Second Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas (VABBA2).

Saturday field trips will focus on deficient atlas areas of Rockingham and Highland counties that overlap with birding hotspots. Sunday field trips will go to local birding hotspots, as always. Expert atlas volunteers and field trip leaders will guide you each day. Field trip destinations include several areas in Shenandoah National Park, George Washington National Forest, Switzer Dam, and Lake Shenandoah.

The itinerary includes a Friday evening business meeting followed by a presentation on area field trips. Nathan Pieplow will be Saturday's keynote speaker at the banquet. His presentation "Listen to Her Sing," dispels the widespread notion that only male birds sing and explores the often-overlooked songs of female birds. Nathan is the author of the Peterson Field Guide to Bird Sounds (Eastern Region), which was published in March 2017. He teaches writing and rhetoric at the University of Colorado in Boulder. Nathan has agreed to lead a field trip exploring female bird songs on Sunday morning; spots on this field trip will be raffled.

The cost of all field trips is included in the registration fee — \$90 which includes the Saturday night banquet. The brand-new Hotel Madison & Shenandoah Valley Conference Center will be the headquarters for this meeting. The VSO has secured special rates of \$129 for a single or \$139 for double occupancy. Parking is \$5 per day. Reserve your room by calling the Hotel Madison at 540-564-0200 or emailing the hotel at [reservations@hotelmadison.com](mailto:reservations@hotelmadison.com); identify yourself as a Virginia Society of Ornithology member to receive these special rates. You can also reserve your room online by going to the hotel website, [www.hotelmadison.com](http://www.hotelmadison.com), clicking on the reservations link and using the **code: AVSO18518** in the group/promo area.

### REPORTED SIGHTINGS AND ACTIVITY FROM APRIL 2018

*(Photo credit is attributed to authors of the sightings, unless otherwise noted)*

**April 5th:** Cathy Millar welcomed the return of the first Purple Martins (pictured below left) to their martin house. This is nine days earlier than usual.





**April 8th:** While working at the Colonial Williamsburg Nursery, Scott Hemler spotted this Yellow-throated Warbler (pictured above right), who was enamored with its handsome reflection in Scott's side view mirror!

**April 10th:** Tory Gussman reports a male and female Northern Bobwhite (below left) at their home in Lake Toano Estates in James City County. Tory exclaims, "First time ever in our living here (30+ years)!"



**April 26th:** Mary Anne & John Fennell report a pair of Rose-breasted Grosbeaks (male pictured below) visiting their feeder.



**April 28th:** While at Newport News Park, Cheryl Jacobson spies a Worm-eating Warbler (below), a rarity this early, while birding.



## **APRIL 14<sup>TH</sup> BIRD WALK AT CHICKAHOMINY RIVERFRONT PARK**

*Photo by Shirley Devan*

Nancy Barnhart led this great bird walk, which had a nice group of birders present! Check out their birding checklist here:

<https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S44571754>.





## **NEW QUARTER PARK (NQP) BIRD WALK APRIL 28TH**

*By James Corliss, Photo by Nancy Barnhart*



Check out the walk's eBird checklist here: <https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S45044621>.

## **2017 RESEARCH GRANT RECIPIENT FINDINGS**

*By Cathy Millar*

One of the important programs that our club dues support is the ornithology grants awarded each year to two or three W&M students. We are amply rewarded by their sharing their research and findings with us. Following is a summary for those who couldn't attend our April meeting.

Dr. Dan Cristol introduced the 2017 recipients starting with master's student, Carly Hawkins, who is finishing her degree and will continue her research in Australia leading to publication before enrolling for her PhD at University of California at Davis. He next introduced Ananda Menon who's finishing his master's degree and will continue research at W&M as an employee before continuing graduate work. The third grant recipient was undergraduate Megan Thompson who is finishing her second year and has already completed a research project.

Megan Thompson's topic was "Can Zebra Finches Avoid Eating Mercury?" After describing how abnormal levels of mercury get into our environment and food chain, she reported that when birds are exposed to high concentrations of mercury, it collects in the bird's blood and feathers and in the eggs of females which can result in decreased reproduction success, immune system deficiency and death. Her research question was: Do birds possess an avoidance mechanism that enables them to develop an aversion to mercury-induced food at high concentrations? She used male Zebra Finches and food laced with a small concentration of mercury to see if after a long period of exposure to mercury the finches would choose uncontaminated food when given the option. There is precedent from previous research done in 2014 that partridges will choose food with lower concentration of pesticides when given visual cues of contamination, as in the color of the food or its placement. Some of the implication if birds can avoid mercury-toxic areas would be that they would be more protected from the toxin and therefore reduce the accumulation and concentration of mercury in the ecosystem. Also, the movement of birds from the contaminated area could disrupt the balance of the existing ecosystem. Megan proceeded to describe in detail how she conducted her research. The finches were in two rooms in an outdoor aviary that had a connecting tunnel. She started with non-mercury bird seed in both rooms. The birds showed an innate preference to the left room. After 7 days, she replaced the food in the left room with mercury contaminated seed. Over the course of the study the finches continued to prefer the left room, which implied that the finches did not possess an avoidance mechanism at the concentration level they were fed. This has broader implications for

other pollutants that are introduced into the environment at smaller concentrations that are detectable but can still have very deleterious effects.

Ananda Menon's topic was "Mercury: Silent Sperm Killer." He noted that male birds must spend a lot of their daily energy requirements to make sperm. Studies have shown that mercury contamination creates about a 50% reduction in bird reproductive success. However, the number of eggs, the length of incubation, the feeding of young and the time in between two clutches remain normal. All these activities vary with female behavior, which led to the question if the reduction in reproduction was a male effect. As an aside, he noted that male reproduction is of concern in humans as well because in the developed world there has been a 50% decrease in human sperm count over the last 40 years which has been referred to as the male fertility crisis by the WHO. He proceeded to describe his research wherein he fed Zebra Finches a diet that either had no mercury in it or a 'tuna salad' level contamination that is equivalent to what birds are exposed to at a contaminated site. He found that mercury did reduce the number of sperm in birds that were exposed to mercury. He explained that with birds one can also study how the sperm is working, because all the sperm that have survived the trip up the female's reproductive system are trapped by the egg membrane around the yolk. Ananda found that yolks had fewer sperm around them when the sperm had come from males exposed to mercury in their food. He also found that mercury-dosed finches had more malformed sperm and shorter sperm cells, which influenced their swimming ability. He reported that male and female birds often have different dietary preferences. He gave several examples, including male Red-wing Blackbirds who generally live and eat more insects at wetland sites whereas females eat more seeds. If that wetland site is mercury contaminated, prime males who eat there are apt to father fewer young. There is also indication that females who mate with these males might have smaller hatchlings that will develop slower.



Photo by Shirley Devan. Left to right: Ananda Menon, Carly Hawkins, Megan Thompson, Dr. Dan Cristol

Carly Hawkins's topic was "Human Influence on Ecosystems, Especially Noise Pollution." She noted that noise covers sounds that birds need to hear such as mating songs or the approach of a predator. As birds become more stressed their immune system suffer and there is overall reduction of reproduction. Birds can cope with noise pollution by either communicating louder or more frequently which takes more energy. Also, males can sing at higher pitches to stand out over the other noises, but females find this less attractive. Or they can leave. Most studies focus on birds that stay in noise, but Carly wants to know how displacing birds from noisy areas is affecting their social groups. Her question is: Can noise drive social change in some bird populations? Will it change who they're friends with, and are they adjusting habitat use in response to noise? Carly noted that the closer connected

birds are, the more readily they can communicate danger, pass on disease and build immune systems, and facilitate mate selection. Although Carly did work with Zebra Finches in Williamsburg, she talked mostly about her research on the Red-backed Fairywren in Australia which are easier to study in the wild because they are very poor flyers and don't travel far. They also form family groups of parents and offspring from the previous year. She studied three groups of birds of four to five each and banded the birds in each family to identify individuals. After studying the birds for a few days, she started playing traffic noise from speakers set near the three families to see if the social groups changed. She described traffic noise as being more variable and less likely to be tuned out by the birds after continued exposure. She also had control social groups who were not exposed to sound. Carly found that sociality decreased with birds exposed to sound. They reduced the number of social partners and the frequency of interaction with the partners they kept. Regarding habitat use, two groups moved away from the sound area when she turned the speaker on, but one group unexplainably moved toward the speaker. She is returning to Australia to continue her research. Carly is interested in how being less social affects reproduction rates or escape predation. Her goal is to gather data to be able to inform policy makers about managing noise pollution, such as using different substrate for roads that make less noise when cars drive on them and incorporating noise considerations when making conservation decisions. She noted the simple act of adhering to speed limits help, as the faster one drives the more noise is introduced. She also did a study



with the Zebra Finches to see how they would react when they couldn't escape noise. As a social group, they huddled together and became more social which she interpreted as increased vigilance due to perceived higher predation risk.

All three ended their presentations by giving thanks to the Williamsburg Bird Club for our help in funding their research.

## **WBC FIELD TRIP APRIL 21ST, CHICKAHOMINY RIVERFRONT PARK WITH MATT ANTHONY**

*By Cheryl Jacobson*

"One of the best field trips ever" was the response of one participant when asked if they enjoyed the morning. Twenty people joined Matt Anthony at the property of Inge Curtis and the adjoining church property. Since the purpose of the trip was to learn how to apply the Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas protocol, Matt began by outlining the codes and what behaviors we would be looking for on the walk.

The key difference between atlasing and general birding is the observation and reporting of specific bird behaviors that provide evidence of breeding in the block. These behaviors are organized based on an increasing level of confidence that a species is in fact defending a territory and nesting in the block. The final level or category confirms evidence of breeding and should be documented for as many species as possible.



### Breeding Categories and Codes:

Observed.

Possible

H = In Appropriate Habitat. A male or female observed in suitable nesting habitat during their breeding season.

S = Singing Male. A singing male in suitable nesting habitat during its breeding season.

Probable.

S7 = Singing male present seven or more days apart. A male is observed singing in the same location on at least two occasions seven or more days apart.

T = Territorial Defense. A permanent territory is presumed through observation of defensive behavior. This can include chasing or fighting with individuals of the same species or counter-singing males (one bird sings in response to another, initiating a series of back and forth vocalizations). This code can also be used for interspecific competition or aggression, e.g. a Blue Jay chasing a crow out of its territory.

C = Courtship, Display, or Copulation. This can include observations of food transfer, displays or grooming between a pair of birds.

N = Probable Nest Site. A bird is observed visiting a potential nest site repeatedly, but there is not enough evidence to upgrade the species to 'Confirmed.' Examples: 1. A Gray Catbird frequently visiting a dense shrub thicket. 2. A Tree Swallow frequently perched on a nest box.

A = Agitated Behavior. This code should be used when agitated behavior or anxiety calls are observed from an adult, when unprovoked by pishing, predators, or the use of playback recordings.

Confirmed

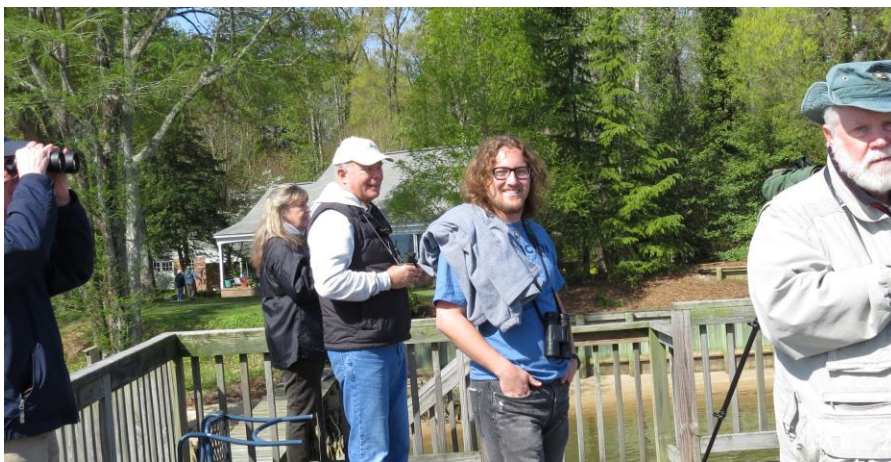
CN = Carrying nest material. One or more individuals are observed carrying sticks or other material for nest building, but nest site is not actually observed

NB = Nest Building. Observation of actual nest construction.

DD = Distraction Display. When an adult feigns injury or attacks an intruder to defend or distract from unseen nest or young.

UN = Used nest. When an occupied nest or eggshells are found, but no adults are present.





FL = Recently fledged young. Juvenile birds, either precocial or altricial (born naked and helpless, e.g. songbirds) that are still dependent on parents.

ON = Occupied Nest. Adults seen perched on a nest or entering and leaving a nest site in circumstances indicating an occupied nest

CF = Carrying Food. Adult bird carrying food for the young. Look for repeated carrying of food in the same direction. Adult birds may be carrying food for courtship or their own consumption.

FY = Feeding Young. Adult bird feeding

recently fledged young that are not independent. Feeding downy fledglings that have left the nest but remain in the natal area.

FS = Carrying Fecal Sac. Adult bird carrying a membranous, white fecal sac away from the nest.

NE = Nest with Eggs (or eggshells on the ground). Only use this code if adult bird is present to verify the species identity. If no birds present and you can identify egg to species, use the UN code above. We encourage you to observe the nest from a safe distance until an adult is seen.

NY = Nest with Young. Nest observed with young either seen or heard. Be especially careful not to prematurely flush nestlings



Participants were attentive and patient. The slower pace established a relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere. Some highlights were patiently observing Blue-Gray Gnatcatchers carrying nesting material and following their paths until the actual nests were observed (photo left). Everyone enjoyed the squeal of a participant who observed a Prothonotary Warbler for the first time. Many reminisced about their own experience of seeing this species for their first time. Also, people were thrilled to see the Peregrine Falcon on the nearby Chickahominy River Bridge.

Other observed breeding behaviors and codes were:

Confirmed-Osprey on nest.

Probable: Rock Pigeon visiting potential nest site, Carolina Chickadee agitated behavior, Eastern Bluebird copulation, Northern Cardinal territorial defense, Red-winged Blackbird pair in suitable habitat, House Finch pair in suitable habitat.

Possible: Tufted Titmouse, Carolina Wren, and Prothonotary Warbler singing male.

Thanks to Inge for being a great hostess and to Matt for doing an excellent job in leading the walk and teaching lots of tips on breeding bird behaviors. Don't miss out on the opportunity to learn, sharpen your observation of bird behaviors, and expand Virginia's data on what is happening with our birds. Participate in the Virginia Breeding Bird Survey.

## SUPPORT OUR LOCALLY OWNED BIRD STORES & FELLOW WBC MEMBERS!

Backyard Birder



**Backyard Birder Seed & Supply** located in Williamsburg at the Quarterpath Shopping Center (near the Kingsmill Harris Teeter) supports the WBC through donations and a 10% discount on purchases for WBC members. For your discount in-store, please inform them you are a WBC member during checkout. <https://www.backyardbirder.org>



**Wild Birds Unlimited** located in Williamsburg at Settler's Market in New Town supports the WBC through donations and a 5% rebate on the pre-tax amount spent in store by WBC members. Please inform them you are a WBC member during checkout. <https://williamsburg.wbu.com/>

## CALENDAR & SUMMER PROGRAMS

May 6	Spring Bird Count
May 12 - 8 am	WBC bird walk at Bassett Trace
May 16 - 7 pm	WBC Meeting & Program (Susan Powell), W&M Andrews Hall, Room 101
May 18-20	VSO Annual Meeting, Harrisonburg, VA
May 26 - 8 am	WBC bird walk at New Quarter Park
June 9 - 8 am	WBC bird walk at Powhatan Creek Trail
June 23 - 8 am	WBC bird walk at New Quarter Park
July 14 - 8 am	WBC bird walk at Warhill Sports Complex
July 28 - 8 am	WBC bird walk at New Quarter Park
August 11 - 8 am	WBC bird walk at Chickahominy WMA
August 25 - 8 am	WBC bird walk at New Quarter Park
August 26	The Flyer submissions are due for September and the consolidated summer issue; please submit all sightings, articles, and activity to <a href="mailto:1backyardbirder@gmail.com">1backyardbirder@gmail.com</a> . Thank you.
September 8 - 8 am	WBC bird walk at Lake Matoaka