



# The Flyer

## Newsletter of the Williamsburg Bird Club

Vol. 44 No. 7

[www.williamsburgbirdclub.org](http://www.williamsburgbirdclub.org)

August 2020

### PRESIDENT'S CORNER

By Cheryl J. Jacobson



I am so thankful for today's technology that has made it possible for us to stay connected and meet via Zoom. We had 65 individuals connect for our July meeting with Nick Newberry regarding tracking migration. I learned a lot, so I hope you were able to join us. Nick reported how rewarding it can be to spot banded birds and then to submit the bird band data to the Bird Banding Laboratory at the website: <https://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/BBL/bblretrv/>. When you do so, you receive a certificate of appreciation including information about the bird. When Nick submitted bird data for a Ring-billed Gull he found in Richmond, he learned the gull had flown 1,140 miles from where it was banded in western Minnesota.



In 2018, I photographed a banded Royal Tern on posts by the Jamestown Ferry (photo left). I also took a close up of the band but submitted it to a different source and did not receive a response. Now I know where to submit the photos. Nick urged us to keep our eyes open for Royal and Common terns and Laughing Gulls that are being banded on their new nesting grounds at Fort Wool.

### Newsletter

I hope you have been enjoying the newsletters. I appreciate the photos you send, and please forgive me if I have become a "nag" by constantly asking for photos. I think the photos we received have been great and it has been worth all the effort at obtaining great breeding bird photos for June and birds eating berries and seeds for this month.

*(Continued on Page 3)*

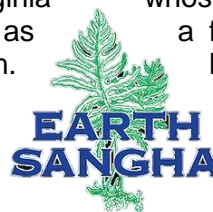
### PROGRAMS

Due to continuing concerns about the coronavirus, WBC has not presently scheduled any bird walks or field trips through August 2020.

#### **August 19 WBC Meeting, 7:00 PM: "Plant Conservation is for the Birds"**

You may remember a flurry of reports last year when scientists documented a staggering loss of nearly 3 billion breeding birds in North America since 1970. Around that time the Cornell Lab of Ornithology identified a few simple actions we can take to help birds (see Further Reading below). High on the list is planting native plants. The more we understand about the powerful connections between plants and birds our interests naturally extend to conservation of native plant species both at home and abroad.

We are fortunate to welcome Matt Bright from Earth Sangha as presenter for our August 19 Zoom meeting. Earth Sangha is a nonprofit public charity based in Northern Virginia whose mission is ecological restoration as a form of socially engaged Buddhism. In the D.C. area they operate a volunteer-based program to propagate local native plants, plant communities, and control invasive alien plants. Their Wild Plant Nursery is the region's most comprehensive effort to propagate native plants directly from local forests and meadows.



On the island of Hispaniola, along the Dominican Republic-Haiti border, Earth Sangha partners with another organization to operate Tree Bank Hispaniola that propagates local native trees, conserves tropical forest, and promotes sustainable agro-ecological practices.

*(Continued on Page 2)*

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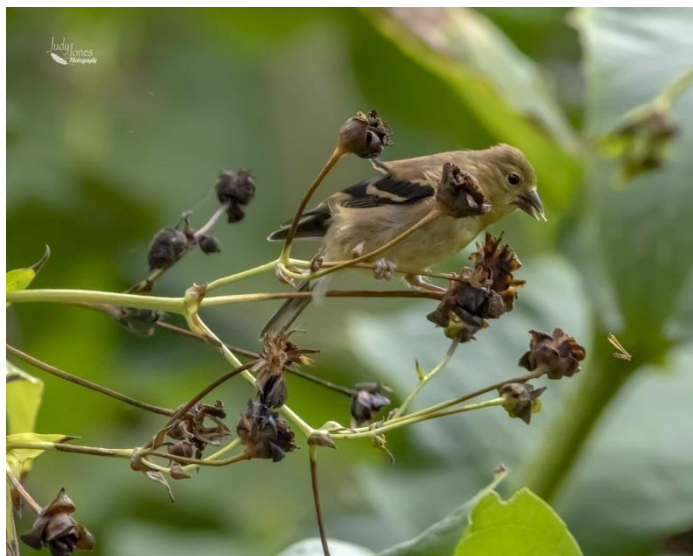
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American Goldfinch feeding on cup plant seeds. Photo by Judy Jones.

### August 19 Program, Continued from Page 1

Please join us via Zoom on August 19 for "Plant Conservation is for the Birds." Matt Bright, Conservation Manager at Earth Sangha, will discuss how intact native plant communities support bird diversity, cite some specific relationships between native plants and native birds, and give examples of native plant restoration and bird conservation in the D.C. area and in their project area on Hispaniola. Along the way Matt will talk about how we can make urban-suburban landscapes more amenable to birds through the conservation and restoration of appropriate native plants. Hope to see you (virtually) on August 19!

#### For Further Reading:

The Cornell Lab's list of seven actions to help birds can be found at <https://www.birds.cornell.edu/home/seven-simple-actions-to-help-birds/>. 🐦



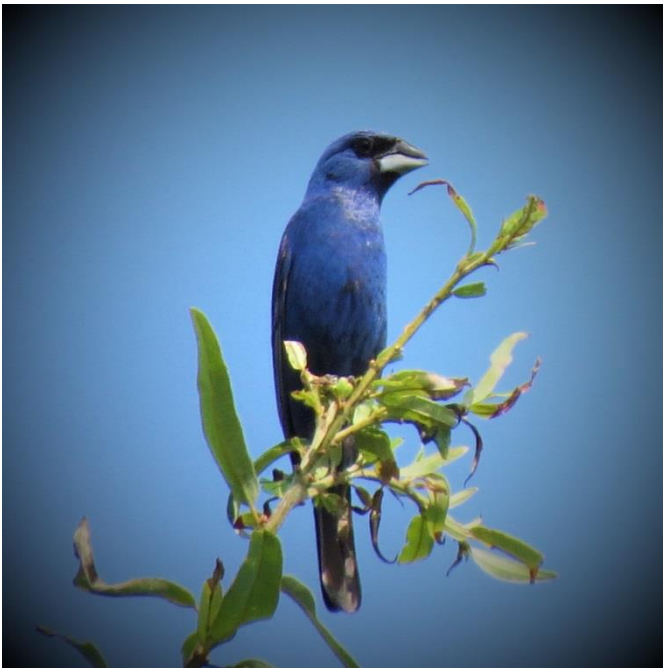
American Robin eating black tupelo fruit. Photo by Julie Wallace.



## President's Corner, Continued from Page 1

Of course, without your submissions it would not have been possible for Mary Ellen to work her magic, so thank you. If you have ideas for future themes for the newsletter photos, let me know. We received many photos of birds eating insects with your previous submissions, so **for the September newsletter we will do BIRDS EATING BUGS.**

You may notice that there are fewer photos of warblers eating seeds and berries. This likely is because warblers eat mostly insects and spiders. However, before and during migration these insect-eating songbirds add more fruits, seeds, and berries to their diet. Poison ivy is a very widespread and productive plant that produces dense clusters of white berries that ripen between August and November. Over sixty species of birds have been documented to eat the berries of poison ivy. In fall and winter, most songbirds will eat seeds and berries so mostly during fall migration is the time for us to photograph them here.



*Blue Grosbeak, seed-eating beak. Photo by Cheryl Jacobson.*

Also, please notice the beaks of the birds and what they are eating. Birds that eat primarily nuts and seeds have short, conical beaks that are widest at the base. These are made to crack open shells and extract the inner nut or seed meat. Finches, cardinals, blue jays, grosbeaks, and sparrows have this type of beak. Please see my photo of the Blue Grosbeak (above) and Judy Jones's photo of the American Goldfinch (Page 2). Compare their beaks with

that of the Common Yellowthroat (below), which would not be able to crack open thick shells.



*Common Yellowthroat with insect. Photo by Carol Annis.*

## WBC Student Research Grants

Zoom also allowed us to attend the William & Mary thesis defenses for Tim Boycott and Heather Kenny, both recipients of WBC grants. I have often wondered how our recipients continued their careers so I followed up with both to learn about their plans. I received this nice reply from Tim:

*I was very appreciative of Williamsburg Bird Club's financial support of this project, and also of the club's presence and community in Williamsburg. I was able to attend a few of the meetings on the William & Mary campus and always had a great time. Thank you, too, for your well wishes as I move on from W&M and Williamsburg. I am currently applying to jobs in applied conservation work, where I hope to use the research and communication skills I've developed through my master's work. Given the current job market, I am having to apply quite broadly but would ideally like to obtain a position in the non-profit/non-governmental sector, conducting and implementing collaborative conservation research. Included in that is certainly work on avian collisions with human-made structures! Thank you once again for all your support and encouragement.*

I knew that Heather Kenny is moving to Colorado to attend the University of Colorado Boulder to pursue her Doctorate Degree. This is what I heard from Heather:

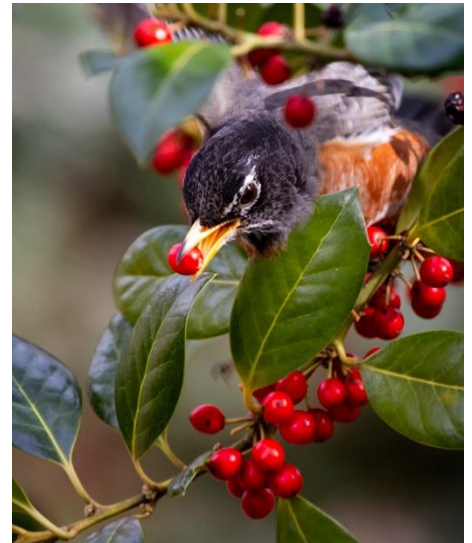
*Thank you for the praise and for taking the time to attend my presentation. I will be studying barn swallow behavior, ecology, and evolution at CU (Continued on Page 4)*

## President's Corner, Continued from Page 3

*Boulder. At this point it is likely that I'll pursue a position as a professor after completing my PhD, although I am also open to other potential career paths. I do enjoy teaching along with doing research, so ideally, I'll be able to find a career where I can do a bit of both. I know these plans are somewhat vague still, but hopefully the newsletter readers will still appreciate hearing a few more details.*

I believe that the energy that WBC receives from all the William & Mary students enhances our Club. I look forward to meeting our next recipients.

If you have not been able to join us in our monthly meetings via Zoom, I hope you will do so in August as it looks like Zoom will be our only option for some time. **I miss seeing you!** 🐦



Left: Great Crested Flycatcher eating berry from a viburnum. Photo by Inge Curtis. Center: Gray Catbird on a sumac. Photo by Paula Perdoni. Right: American Robin eating holly berries. Photo by Wendy Nelson.

## TRACKING BIRDS FROM THE COMFORT OF YOUR HOME

By Cathy Millar

Did you know the first record of banding comes from John James Audubon who, in 1803, described tying "silver string" (probably wire) around the legs of five Eastern Phoebe nestlings and stated he found two of the banded phoebes nesting in the same area a year later? Since then, 60 million birds have been banded and of those, 4 million reencountered. Methods of tracking birds have also evolved a great deal.

Nick Newberry, guest speaker at our second WBC Zoom membership meeting, took us through a fascinating tour of these methods in his presentation: *Tracking Bird Migration from Home: A Dive into the Vast World of Online Bird Migration Resources*. Nick was one of our ornithology research grant recipients; he graduated from William and Mary (W&M) in 2017, and now works as an environmental scientist for a local consulting firm. As an undergraduate, his experience with the Alaska Dept. of Fish and Game

studying the migration of Olive-sided Flycatchers stimulated his interest in migration tracking.

Nick reported that every autumn, even with bird populations declining, about 4 billion birds move south from Canada into the US and 4.7 billion leave the US to head to the tropics. In Virginia there are three different types of migrants: birds that breed in VA and then fly further south for the winter; birds that breed further north and migrate to VA to spend the winter; and migrants that fly through VA stopping only to rest and eat. There are two ways to gather data about these migrants. One requires attaching tracking devices and the other observing and identifying the species while noting the number of birds seen and the date and location, and submitting the data to sites like eBird.

(Continued on Page 5)





*Ruby-crowned Kinglet eating poison ivy berries. Photo by Inge Curtis.*



*Cedar Waxwing eating privet berries. Photo by Barbara Houston.*

### Tracking Birds, Continued from Page 4

Nick described four main ways birds are currently tracked. Banding involves a metal band sporting a number that is unique to the individual bird that is stored in a database curated by US Geological Survey. More detail may be added by a colored band that tells where the bird was banded. Yet another form of band is a leg flag with a code that can inform the observer as to the exact identity of that bird without requiring capturing it. Nick reported how rewarding spotting and submitting bird band data to the Bird Banding Laboratory at their website (<https://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/BBL/bblretrv/>) can be as one receives a certificate of appreciation including information about the bird. He discovered that a Ring-billed Gull he found in Richmond had flown 1,140 miles from where it was banded in western Minnesota. He urged us to keep our eyes open for Royal and Common terns and Laughing Gulls that are being banded on their new nesting grounds at Fort Wool.

The second way birds are tracked is through radio telemetry, wherein the bird carries a small lightweight nanotag transmitter that emits a radio frequency specific for that bird. The main drawback has been that the bird can be tracked from a distance of only 1 to 2 miles. Until recently radio telemetry has been useful only for researching how a bird uses its breeding territory. But now Motus (Latin for "movement") towers that have receivers for picking up a signal from a tagged individual that flies within a few kilometers of a tower have been erected along migratory routes. Some Motus towers can be found locally at Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge, Fisherman's Island, and Craney Island. The Center for

Conservation Biology (CCB) at W&M has been using the Motus network to track the migration of the Ipswich Sparrow, a subspecies of the Savannah Sparrow that nests only on Sable Island off Nova Scotia and winters along the Atlantic coast, and can be found on Virginia dunes. More info about the Motus Wildlife Tracking System can be found at <https://motus.org/>.

Birds are also tracked with satellite GPS, which requires that the bird wears a big backpack with an antenna and solar panels. The size of the backpack limits its use to only big birds. The CCB has collected a lot of valuable data from whimbrels that have carried these packs for years. Nick told us about Project SNOWstorm that attaches transmitters that use the cellular phone network to record information on Snowy Owls. Each owl is named, and if you go to <https://www.projectsnowstorm.org/tracking-snowy-owls/> and click on 'owls,' you can choose to read about specific birds. Nick claimed that their life stories often resemble the drama of soap operas.

The fourth method of tracking is geolocation. Nick has had personal experience with Olive-sided Flycatchers who wore on their backs a unit that has a diode that tracks light and records when the sun rises and sets daily. Factoring in the time of the year, the researcher can then determine location. The unit is too small to transmit the data to a satellite, so the bird has to be recaptured. The data isn't as precise as GPS but the big advantage is that this tracking method can be used on smaller birds. The Olive-sided Flycatcher migrates from Alaska to Peru covering 12-14,000 miles per year. Tracking them has shown that every fall they migrate south through (Continued on Page 6)

## Tracking Bird Migration, Continued from Page 5

the central part of our country and then return along the west coast as they follow food sources and prevailing winds. Despite their nesting grounds remaining adequate, their population is in decline. The geolocators are helping scientists determine where Olive-sided Flycatchers may be having trouble refueling during migration and can inform important conservation decisions for this species and others.

Nick noted that fall migration is just about to begin. Purple Martins are one of the first to migrate and will be starting to form their huge communal roosts in the next couple of weeks. He showed us how we can track migration in real time via BirdCast, which uses US weather surveillance radar. When planning a field trip, one can use the site <https://birdcast.info/> the night before to see if heavy migration is predicted for your area. Nick also recommended eBird Science at <https://ebird.org/science>, where one can view interactive maps of the species of one's choice that capture the range and abundance of that bird by season more accurately than shown in field guides. These maps are made possible by birders like us submitting observations to eBird.

Real cutting edge in tracking involves the International Space Station (ISS). New technology is allowing solar powered units to work on smaller birds and transmit data to a dedicated antenna on the ISS that collects information on the bird's location, altitude, body temperature, external temperature, and the bird's velocity. This will allow tracking birds more accurately and enable scientists to better understand bird declines and general bird biology.

Migration is fraught with considerable dangers, and Nick pointed out that birds hitting glass windows is a big one. He described many ways of treating our windows to improve the visibility of windows to birds and said he'd be happy to consult with anyone having trouble to figure out a solution. He has had experience treating windows on the W&M campus that has led to saving hundreds of birds. Nick can be reached at [nickenew1@gmail.com](mailto:nickenew1@gmail.com).

With the pandemic keeping us closer to home, we are grateful to Nick for giving us a lot to think about and explore. 🐦

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## OSPREYWATCH AND THE CENTER FOR CONSERVATION BIOLOGY

By Cathy Flanagan

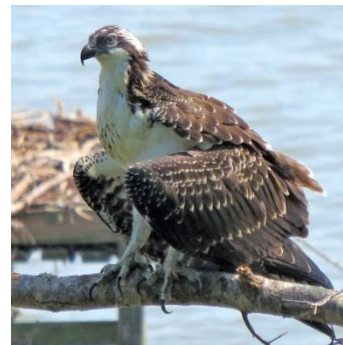


*Osprey bringing food to nest.  
Photo by Suzanne Stern.*

Another season of OspreyWatch is ending. WBC members may not be aware that everyone is welcome to participate. Simply visit [osprey-watch.org](https://osprey-watch.org) and you can't miss how to "Become an Osprey Watcher". The project is a global one, created by the Center for Conservation Biology (CCB) in 2012. The Historic Rivers Chapter of the Virginia Master Naturalists started participating from the beginning

and now has over 50 monitors. Fortunately, the Osprey population is large enough to always have room for more monitors! The importance of the project is that it was designed to collect information on a sufficiently large spatial scale to be useful in addressing three of the most pressing issues facing

aquatic ecosystems: global climate change, depletion of fish stocks, and environmental contaminants.



*Fledgling Osprey. Photo by  
Cheryl Jacobson.*

OspreyWatch is just one of over 500 projects monitored by the CCB, a research group shared by William & Mary (W&M) and Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU).<sup>1</sup> As stated on their website, the focus of the CCB "is the development and distribution of information resources that are needed for effective,

science-based conservation. Such information is the vital currency that drives all aspects of conservation. The Center serves as one of the principal advisors to government and non-governmental agencies responsible for the management and recovery of avian species at risk. The Center provides opportunities for students, professionals, and the (Continued on Page 7)



## OspreyWatch, Continued from Page 6

general public to learn about species and ecosystems at risk." CCB offices are currently located on Ironbound Road, in the Minson Galt House. However, its future location will be in a new 14,000-square-foot facility at VCU's Rice Rivers Center, which is a 494-acre field station along the James River. Construction was due to begin this spring.

The CCB was founded in 1992 by Mitchell Byrd and Bryan Watts, who are both central to the strength of the ornithology program at W&M, the work of the CCB, and our own Williamsburg Bird Club. If you were able to attend the 40th anniversary of the WBC, you had the chance to hear Dr. Byrd speak. He is the Chancellor Professor Emeritus of Biology at W&M and will be 92 this August 16th! Dr. Byrd came to W&M in 1956, and he quickly gained a reputation for serious scholarship and for his dedication to field work documenting Williamsburg area bird species.

In 1972, under Byrd's leadership, W&M hosted the first ever North American Osprey Conference. Researchers presented their findings on topics such as Osprey productivity and population status, as well as the effects of environmental contaminants on Ospreys throughout Canada, the US, and Mexico.

Before the pesticide DDT was outlawed in 1972, the Osprey population in Tidewater Virginia had reduced to 500 pairs. As a member of the North American Osprey Committee, Dr. Byrd is credited with helping to alert the world to the problem and with helping to resolve it.<sup>2</sup> As of 2019, the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Osprey population is estimated at 10,000 pairs!<sup>3</sup> Dr. Byrd estimates that he has put tags on over 3,500 ospreys and built 75 nest platforms.

During his tenure at W&M, Dr. Byrd instructed thousands of undergraduates and advised some three dozen graduate students. In 1977, one of those graduate students, Bill Williams, along with Ruth Beck, Assistant Professor of Biology, and Dr. Byrd, worked to establish the Williamsburg Bird Club. The first program speaker for the club was, fittingly, Dr. Byrd. His presentation was on the role of contaminants in the Chesapeake Bay on the Osprey population<sup>4</sup>. That same year, Dr. Byrd began low altitude surveys of Bald Eagle nests to monitor their production. These surveys have been conducted two or three times a year ever since with Mitchell Byrd in the co-pilot seat. I understand that he was still doing the flights at age 90!<sup>5</sup>



*Osprey feeding time. Photo by Suzanne Stern.*

"Although Professor Byrd has had many academic accomplishments, likely his most lasting legacy is his commitment to convey an environmental ethic to a public audience" said Bryan Watts, on the occasion of the establishment of the Mitchell A. Byrd Research Professorship of Conservation Biology. Dr. Watts was a former graduate student of Byrd's and the first holder of that Professorship. He has been Director of the CCB for 28 years.

In 2003, Dan Cristol, Chancellor Professor of Biology at W&M, founded the Institute of Integrative Bird Behavior Studies. The bird club is fortunate that Dr. Cristol gives so generously of his time. He generates enthusiasm in his students and connects the club and students together in productive ways.

Perhaps we could keep all these dedicated pioneers of conservation in mind when we're out in the field or recording our data. (*Continued on Page 8*)

## UPDATE FROM THE PURPLE MARTIN LANDLADY

By Cathy Millar

*Editor's Note: Cathy first wrote about her years of experience providing a Purple Martin house at her home on the edge of downtown Williamsburg in the June 2020 issue of The Flyer. She graciously agreed to provide an update on this year's nesting activity.*

After weeks of seven Purple Martins (2 adults and 5 subadults) treating our martin house like a B&B, staying at night and leaving for the day after breakfast, there finally are babies! I've been hosting Purple Martins for over 35 years and normally, youngsters would be fledging now. I would be really interested in knowing why the two pairs took so long in getting down to business this year!

The first martin to return was an adult male on March 27<sup>th</sup>. By the end of May an adult pair had claimed an east-facing box and a subadult pair a west-facing box. I enjoyed hearing the pairs "talking" in their boxes at sundown. On June 24, I saw both adult and subadult males carrying part of a sturdy green leaf in their beaks. The adult brought his to his mate, who was sitting on a light post. She touched it with her beak after which he deposited it into their nest box. The subadult flew directly to his nest box with his. I chuckled, wondering when the subadult would acquire the wisdom of checking for his mate's approval first!

On July 16<sup>th</sup>, I finally saw the subadults delivering dragonflies to a raucous reception at their nest box. Then on July 19<sup>th</sup> I saw for the first time the adult pair bringing in dragonflies. The adult pair includes the



*Feeding the Purple Martin chicks. Photo by Cathy Millar.*

female who had her tail so rudely yanked by a House Sparrow in early May when she was choosing a nest box. For the next few days, I saw this female sitting nearby, appearing hesitant to return to the martin house. Now I'm hoping the youngsters will survive the high temperatures we've had lately and have time to mature enough to survive the rigors of migration. The three subadults who did not nest continue to be a very vocal part of their community. These observations were made from 15-30 minutes of dedicated watching almost every morning and evening.



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## OspreyWatch, Continued from Page 7

### References

<sup>1</sup><https://ccbbirds.org/about-us/from-the-director/>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.dailypress.com/news/dp-xpm-19910224-1991-02-24-9102190747-story.html>

<sup>3</sup><https://dwr.virginia.gov/wp-content/uploads/media/Virginia-Osprey-Nest-Guidelines-2020.pdf>. Osprey Nest Management in Virginia: A Guide-line for Landowners.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3800602.pdf?seq=1>

<sup>5</sup><https://www.wm.edu/news/stories/2018/has-the-james-river-reached-peak-eagle.php>

For Further Reading:

[High Profile: Mitchell Byrd](#). Daily Press.

[New Professorship Honors Conservationist](#). W&M News

[Virginia Conservation Center Celebrates 25 Years as a Bird's Best Friend](#). Richmond Times-Dispatch.

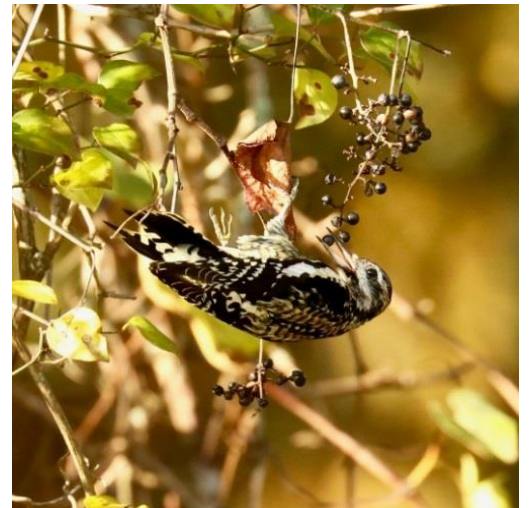
[A History of the Williamsburg Bird Club](#)

[Our 40th Anniversary Meeting's Guest Speaker: Who Is Dr. Byrd?](#) The Flyer.

[VCU Rice Rivers Center](#)

[Retired Professor's Surveys Help Save Eagles](#). Richmond Times-Dispatch. 





**MORE BIRDS EATING BERRIES AND SEEDS:** Clockwise from upper left, Northern Mockingbird, beautyberry fruit, photo by Carol Annis; Blue Jay with blueberry, photo by Keith Kennedy; Downy Woodpecker (grape?), photo by Inge Curtis; Northern Cardinal, chaste tree seeds, photo by Inge Curtis; Orchard Oriole, mulberries, photo by Julie Wallace.

## RECENT SIGHTINGS



During the mid-July heat wave, **Jan Lockwood** captured the photo of the **Cooper's Hawk** on the left "cooling off" in Jan's bird bath. Jan says, "She's a formidable bird who patrols two or three times a week." Around the same time, **Lisa Nickel** captured the photo on the right of a young **Great Horned Owl** in the Kingsmill neighborhood. 🦉



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### **ANNUAL DONATIONS FROM OUR LOCALLY-OWNED BIRD STORES**

The Williamsburg Bird Club wishes to express our gratitude to our locally-owned Bird Stores, Wild Birds Unlimited and Backyard Birder Seed & Supply, for their generous donations each year to the Club. Their contributions help sustain WBC's annual commitment to provide funds for the Ornithology Research Grants given annually to graduate students at the College of William and Mary as well as support other Club projects and activities.

#### **PLEASE CONTINUE TO 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 by donating to the club an amount equal to 5% of the pre-tax amount spent in the store by WBC members each year. Please inform them you are a WBC member during checkout. <https://williamsburg.wbu.com/>