



The Flyer

Newsletter of the Williamsburg Bird Club

Vol. 45 No. 3

www.williamsburgbirdclub.org

March 2021

PRESIDENT'S CORNER

By Cheryl Jacobson



YOUR BOARD LOVES BIRDS

During this pandemic, birds have many meanings for us. They symbolize freedom as they fly unconstrained, unlike us with virus limitations. They symbolize a return to "normal routines" as demonstrated by the pending spring migration. They provide hope and joy and perhaps love. I quote Mehmet Murat Ildan: "Wherever there are birds, there is hope." Ildan also said: "Give food to the birds, you will then be surrounded by the wings of love, you will be encompassed by the joys of little silent hearts." Since I am writing this on Valentine's Day, this quote seems very fitting.

For my column this month I asked the WBC Board Members and Committee Chairpersons to send me a photo of a bird that they have enjoyed with a comment about why that bird made them smile and gave them some happiness. The submissions I received, along with my own bird choice, begin on Page 3.

I find joy in being with people who love birds and who have a deep understanding that birds matter. This sentiment is so well expressed by Melanie Driscoll, Audubon Director of bird conservation for the Gulf of Mexico and the Mississippi Flyway:

Birds are important because they keep systems in balance: they pollinate plants, disperse seeds, scavenge carcasses and recycle nutrients back into the earth. But they also feed our spirits, marking for us the passage of the seasons, moving us to create art and poetry, inspiring us to flight and reminding us that we are not only on, but of, this earth.

You can read the wise words from other bird lovers at [Why Do Birds Matter? | Audubon](#).

I thank each of you for that understanding, and I hope to walk with you soon. (Continued on Page 3)

UPCOMING PROGRAMS

By Tory Gussman and Dean Shostak

March 17, via Zoom at 7:00 PM: "Birds of Ghana," with presenter Bob Ake. You will receive a Zoom invitation via email a few days prior to the meeting.

Travel to Africa on March 17 to go birding with Bob Ake and skip the COVID shots and jet lag! Virtually, of course. Bob will present our March program (via Zoom) summarizing his 2019 trip to Ghana with Bill Williams and Rockjumper Tours. He will introduce us to the birds of Ghana augmented by some history of the country. In addition to birds, we will also see the African mammals they encountered.

Bob notes that since coming to Virginia in 1969 he's "spent an enormous amount of time chasing birds of one sort or another in most of the various corners of the world." He's been very active in the VSO, the Cape Henry Audubon Society, and CVWO conducting birding trips at Back Bay, the Dismal Swamp, and Fisherman's Island NWRs. For many years he ran pelagic trips and birding tours to many parts of the US and abroad. His trip to Ghana was motivated in part by an ambitious goal of observing a member from each family of the world's birds!

April 17, Student Research Update

On April 17, four W&M students will present the results of research supported by a Bill Sheehan/Ruth Beck Ornithology Research Grant awarded by our club. Casey McLaughlin and Jasmine Whelan will discuss their coordinated studies of the effects of sublethal dietary mercury on levels of the stress hormone corticosterone in birds and on feather quality. Robin Thady and Lauren Emerson each conducted research aimed to reduce (Continued on Page 2)



DON'T FORGET TO RENEW YOUR WBC MEMBERSHIP FOR 2021!

Use the form on Page 9.

WBC EXECUTIVE BOARD 2020

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Upcoming Programs, Cont. from Page 1

bird collisions with man-made structures. Robin evaluated the effectiveness of certain attributes of acoustic warning signals, such as frequency level and whether a sound changes over time, in increasing a bird's attention to its surroundings, while Lauren studied whether lighting conditions affect the risk of bird collisions with windows.

May 19, Climate Change and its Effect on Food for Migrating Birds

Dr. Amanda Gallinat is an ecologist who studies how environmental change affects plants, birds, and their interactions. At our May 19 program, Dr. Gallinat will present fascinating and important findings from her recent research on the effects of climate change on the timing of fruit ripening and bird migration in the northeast. Mark your calendar! 🐦

Editor's Note: In the February 2021 issue of The Flyer, the bird pictured on Page 1, identified as a Whimbrel, is actually an "Eastern" Willet.

NEW LIBRARY BOOKS

By Lee Schuster

In 2020, the Williamsburg Regional Library purchased the following books for its collection using funds donated by the WBC:

- *The Backyard Birdwatcher's Bible*, by Paul Sterry, Christopher Perrins, Sonya Patel Ellis, and Dominic Couzens
- *The Bird Way: A New Look at How Birds Talk, Work, Play, Parent, and Think*, by Jennifer Ackerman
- *The Bird Way: A New Look at How Birds Talk, Work, Play, Parent, and Think*, by Jennifer Ackerman (e-book)
- *Cerulean Blues* by Katie Fallon
- *Field Notes from an Unintentional Birder*, by Julia Zarankin
- *The Genius of Birds*, by Jennifer Ackerman (e-book)
- *National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America*, by Jon L. Dunn
- *The Sibley Guide to Birds* by David Allen Sibley
- *Sibley's Birding Basics*, by David Allen Sibley (e-book)
- *Vesper Flights*, by Helen MacDonald. 🐦

President's Corner, Continued from Page 1



Cheryl Jacobson, President: Moving here from the West, it brings me joy to see **Western Tanagers**. It's like a visit from an old friend. I used to see them often in my yard in Denver. Bill Williams allowed me to visit his yard where one came yearly from 2009-2018. Then, in 2016, one came to my yard in March for 13 days. This year I saw both a male and female at a yard near Yorktown Battlefield. Here are photos of the female (left) and the male (right) for your comparison. Study the female as they would be easy to overlook.



Tory Gussman, Co-Vice President, Programs: This little **Pine Warbler** entertained me for several minutes last month as he hung around on our deck in the sunshine. He visits my feeders regularly. It's great to have these guys stay around all winter.



Mary Ellen Hodges, Vice-President, Editor: No one is likely to dispute the beauty of a solitary **Cedar Waxwing**, and I find the spectacle of a large winter flock on the search for fruiting trees and shrubs even more thrilling. (Photo, with Eastern Bluebird as well, taken January 30, 2016, in Cedar Grove Cemetery.)

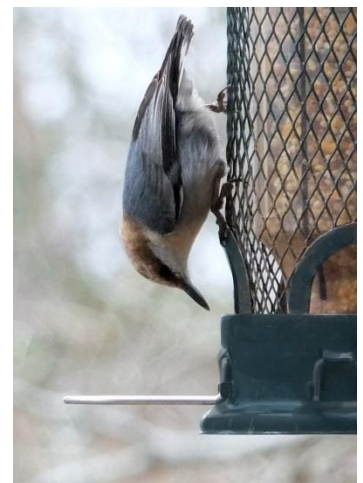


Ann Carpenter, Treasurer: My husband Gary and I spend our breakfast hour daily looking out a large window enjoying our feeder and yard birds. I was very excited after so many years of watching our feeders to finally see a **Purple Finch** along with some of the other eruptive birds this winter (Pine Siskin and Red-breasted Nuthatch). And I was happy to be able to capture on camera both the Purple Finch (right) and **House Finch** (left) for showing my non-birding friends how to tell the difference.



Cathy Millar, Secretary: This is a **Cooper's Hawk** looking up at me at my kitchen window as he finishes a fine dinner of eastern cottontail.

Cathy Flanagan, Refreshments: I always enjoy a visit from this **Brown-headed Nuthatch**. Its soft brown head is distinctive and its squeaky call stands out to my ear.



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President's Corner, Continued from Page 3



Jeanette Navia, Membership/Webmaster: The reason I like this bird is I rarely see this species at my feeder, so it makes me happy when I notice a different bird. I had to look her up in a book to make sure she was a **Purple Finch**. All birds make me smile. (Oh, except for House Sparrows and too many Red-winged Blackbirds and grackles!)



Gary Carpenter, Member-at-Large/Assistant Editor: Sorry for the poor quality of the photo. It was taken with a cell phone and through a screened window. But the story is cute . . . and true. Brian Tabor came to our place for a meeting with my wife Ann and they were seated at our breakfast table. Ann mentioned that we had a **Red-headed Woodpecker** visiting our suet feeder. Brian said that she must mean a Red-bellied Woodpecker. Ann replied, "No, I mean Red-headed . . . like that one at the suet right now." Sadly, the tree the pair dwelt in was cut down by the county and we have not seen one in our backyard since.



Bill Williams, Past President: This is an **American Pipit**, one of the 54 at Chickahominy Riverfront Park on February 14, 2021. Inclement winter weather, particularly days with ice and snow, makes for ideal conditions to encounter this cryptically-colored, very active species in large open areas.

George Martin, Field Trips: Here's a photo I took of a **Great Blue Heron** standing on the railing of a pedestrian bridge in Ford's Colony. I took the picture on December 13, 2020.



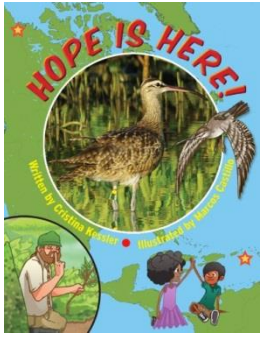
Shirley Devan, Member-at-Large: I took this photo and sent it along because it's a classic Virginia winter scene — **Northern Cardinal** in the snow. For better or worse, we don't have that much snow here anymore, so a Northern Cardinal in the snow is a welcome sight.

WBC MEMBERSHIP

Please welcome the following new members to our club: Claudia McMurray Family, Madeline Vann, Susan Wolfe, Louisa Ford, and Kandi Triner-Herbaugh and Butch Herbaugh. The purpose of the Williamsburg Bird Club is to promote interest in the study of wild birds, protect birds and their habitats, and share the joy of birding with others. If you would like to join our club, or if you need to renew your membership for 2021, please print, complete, and return the form on Page 9. The membership form can also be found on our website at the following link: <https://williamsburgbirdclub.org/219-2/> . 🐦

TRACKING WHIMBRELS

By Cathy Millar



It is always a special treat to hear Dr. Bryan Watts, the Mitchell A. Byrd Professor of Conservation Biology and Director of the Center for Conservation Biology, discuss his research. At our February 17 joint Zoom meeting with the Historic Rivers Chapter of the Virginia Master Naturalists, Dr. Watts

explored the secret life and conservation challenges of a migrant shorebird. One of the larger shore birds, the Whimbrel has a global distribution. In North America, there are three distinct breeding populations: Hudson Bay, Mackenzie River Delta, and the Alaskan populations. Since 1993, Dr. Watts has been studying the Hudson Bay and Mackenzie Whimbrels which begin arriving on the Virginia Barrier Islands in mid-April after a nonstop flight from their wintering grounds in the Amazon Delta area. In Virginia, using their long-curved bills adapted to extract fiddler crabs from their burrows, the birds build up enough fat reserves to make their final flight to their arctic breeding grounds. They gain about 7 grams per day over their stay of 3 – 4 weeks, increasing their weight by about 50%.

Dr. Watts started his study by conducting flight surveys at about 50 feet above the ground, which revealed a 50% decline in the Whimbrel population over a 10-year period, with a continued 4% annual decline. The urgency to find the cause led to setting up a field site in 2007 at Box Tree Creek in Machipongo on the Eastern Shore to catch Whimbrels, apply coded leg bands, and take a variety of measurements in an air-conditioned van that protected the birds from overheating. He noted that Whimbrels are very skittish and that catching them requires remotely setting off rocket-launched nets in the marsh from an offshore boat. Applying glue-on digital transmitters to study local movement patterns, Dr. Watts' research team discovered that individuals returned year after year to specific creeks, which highlighted the importance of protecting those areas. In 2008, Whimbrel Watch at the Box Tree Creek dock was begun wherein anyone who is interested can witness Whimbrels taking to the air in V formation, filling the air with their contact calls as they begin their final nonstop 4–5-day flight to their breeding grounds. About 80% of the birds leave about two to three hours before dark between May 23 and 26. A sister Whimbrel Watch in Toronto has documented the same birds passing over Toronto by morning,

showing them to have already covered over 475 miles overnight!

A four-year study indicated that the Mid-Atlantic staging grounds continued to provide ideal resources and were not contributing to the decline of Whimbrel populations. Seeking to identify where the birds were encountering problems, Watts' team deployed solar-powered satellite transmitters attached to the birds via a leg-loop harness and have tracked 50 birds over their entire migratory route over the last 12 years. One of the tracked Whimbrels became the celebrity, "Hope," whose movements were followed globally on her website and who was immortalized in the book, *Hope is Here!*, by Cristina Kessler. Hope's celebrity status prevented her wintering spot on Great Pond in St Croix from being developed for condos. Tracking revealed that Whimbrels faithfully return to specific breeding, staging, and wintering spots. It also showed that after breeding, the Mackenzie birds stage in Atlantic Canada for 3-4 weeks and then fly 6,000 km nonstop over open ocean in an outward curve to avoid most hurricanes on route to Brazil. The Hudson Bay birds make their final stage along the Virginia to Georgia coastline and then fly 3,500 km straight over the Caribbean Islands and often through hurricanes to Brazil.

Research on the arctic breeding grounds has revealed no problems but did find that staging areas presented difficulties. Watts and his team have identified a few critical spring roosting sites along our southeast coast that need protection from human disturbance; and in Whimbrel staging grounds in Atlantic Canada, blueberry farmers who have expanded their farms into a 100-million-dollar industry are known to fight off hungry birds with a variety of devices. A 3-year study led by Watts revealed that the farmers were wasting more berries during harvest than the birds were eating and, thus, his team is working with the Canadians to establish an outreach education program to alter the farmers' perceptions.

A major factor in Whimbrel decline has been identified on Caribbean Islands, especially the French ones, where hurricanes force exhausted Whimbrels and other migrant bird down on the islands and they are shot for sport after the storm passes. Mangroves have even been cleared for easier shooting and, in France, hunting these migrants is advertised as a tourist destination. In one field in Barbados, 3,000 birds were shot in one day! It is estimated that one to two thousand birds are shot for sport per year on

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Tracking Whimbrels, Continued from Page 5

these islands. Dr. Watts has been working with the Fish and Wildlife Service to work with these other countries to alter hunting practice. Already there have been some bag and season limits enacted, and the Red Knot is on a no-hunt list.

Dr. Watts concluded that the Whimbrel project, having started in Virginia, has pointed to a need for an international conservation effort. Research is only 5% of the solution. The other 95% is finding economic incentive for conservation and engaging people of different cultures and educating their children to understand the importance of the locations that they share with Whimbrels. The First Lady of Saint Croix bought and distributed the book *Hope is Here!* to the

4th graders on the island. Dr. Watts also purchased this book with the help of a foundation for distribution to 4th graders on the Eastern Shore, where Hope had staged every spring. For two years, he gave talks to these 4th graders. The program has been continued by the Nature Conservancy, and there is an ongoing effort to link those schools with those in Saint Croix.

For more about these fascinating birds and this inspiring research, please watch this presentation in full. It will be available on Zoom until our March meeting. Use Passcode 8.5WMugV at this link: https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/share/xFq2TjW_WsJ8Xm41JCAiGb16iWPJQj8F6onfmnQVn32V9gY8nAPv0Um8r4VI0T8o.CQiVuJq4tITyqH19. 🐦

MAINLAND FARM/DRUMMOND'S FIELD

By Cheryl Jacobson

If you haven't birded this site, located near Greensprings Road and 4-H Club Road, I suggest you check it out. I stop often and have been rewarded with some rarities. Just recently, on Jan. 28, 2021, I was looking for snipe and met Andrew Rapp birding the same spot. Just when I was leaving, I saw a small bird fly over my head calling a thin *kreet* call. It landed near a snowy patch in the field and was immediately located by Andrew. Of course, I backed up and joined Andrew who identified it as a **Least Sandpiper**, a rare winter bird for this area. Note its yellowish not black legs. This species has only been seen four times in this area in the winter months. All sightings have been at this same location: Feb. 10, 2015; Jan. 18, 2018 by Bill Williams and me; Dec. 31, 2019; and this sighting.



Least Sandpiper. Photo by Andrew Rapp, 1/28/21.



Rusty Blackbird. Photo by Cheryl Jacobson, 2/4/21..

In the winter, if you check in the trees along the field, you might find some **Rusty Blackbirds**, as I did on Feb. 4, 2021. According to the Cornell Lab website, [All About Birds](#), the Rusty Blackbird is one of North America's most rapidly declining species. The population has plunged an estimated 85-99 percent over the past forty years, and scientists are completely puzzled as to what is the cause. These blackbirds are relatively uncommon denizens of wooded swamps, breeding in the boreal forest and wintering in the eastern US. In winter, they travel in small flocks and are identified by their distinctive rusty feather edges and pallid yellow eyes. 🐦

THANK YOU, VIRGINIA INSTITUTE OF MARINE SCIENCE

By Cheryl Jacobson



WBC member Shan Gill assisted in the relocation of the Purple Martin colony to VIMS.

The Williamsburg Bird Club recently installed our fourth Purple Martin colony on the property of the Virginia Institute of Marine Science at Gloucester Point thanks to the assistance of W&M Chancellor Professor of Biology Dan Cristol, VIMS Director of News and Media Services David Malmquist, and VIMS Director of Facilities Management Mark Brabham and his staff from the Facilities Office. We are also grateful to the previous owner of the colony who is selling her residence, lo-

cated close to VIMS. She allowed the WBC to purchase the setup at half price. Her colony has been established since 2016 and successfully fledged 76 Martins this past summer. Without the support of VIMS, potential re-establishment of the colony at a nearby location could not have been accomplished, so the WBC is very grateful. Our expectation is that the Purple Martins will move to the VIMS location when they return from South America this spring.



Adult male Purple Martin. Photo by Cathy Millar.

I hope you will enjoy watching the Purple Martins. Be on the lookout for the early "Scout" birds. The colony is located on the York River beach near the aquaculture pump house; however, for now, the VIMS Campus is closed to the public, including volunteers, because of the pandemic. 🐦

RECENT BIRD SIGHTINGS

We want to know what you're seeing in your yard and travels. Please share with Club members by sending your sightings and photos to Mary Ellen Hodges at me.hodges@cox.net.

Nancy Barnhart wrote in to say that on February 6 she participated in a Winter Waterfowl Survey sponsored by the Audubon Society of Northern Virginia. "We spent the day on the Rappahannock and parts of the Piankatank Rivers. A highlight was this beautiful **Long-tailed Duck** (photo below) in Deltaville."



George Martin shared his experience during this year's Great Backyard Bird Count, held February 12-15: "I birded exclusively in Ford's Colony. Despite the generally gloomy conditions, the birding was quite good. I identified 45 species over those four days, with 20 of them seen from my kitchen window.

Following are a few highlights and observations from the GBBC. A **Fox Sparrow** was a new species for my Ford's Colony bird list. **Wood Ducks** are seen infrequently within the community, but there was a Male/Female pair seemingly exploring the flooded woods near one of the main roads. The rainy weather disrupted the plumage for a few birds. I'm amazed how disheveled **Eastern Bluebirds** look when they get wet so that their feathers can't scatter light. But the rain didn't seem to bother some birds. A **Sharp-shinned Hawk** appeared to have just eaten, and spent at least 30 minutes perched near the top of a tree overhanging one of the main roads in the community.

Cathy Millar shared the following on February 19: "These last few days, I've been amused watching a feisty **Yellow-rumped Warbler** relentlessly chasing a twitchy **Ruby-crowned Kinglet** out of a small red-bud that is next to my suet feeder. The kinglet keeps flaring its crown in agitation. Guess it's a case of the Yellow-rumped finding someone even smaller to bully!"

Jan Lockwood reported that "Six of us enjoyed an unexpected find while Wildlife Mapping in New Quarter Park on February 23. On our walk up the hill from the floating dock on Queens Creek we looked across (Continued on Page 8)

Recent Bird Sightings, Continued from Page 7

to the Queens Lake Marina where Sue Mutell spotted this **Osprey** perched on the platform which has housed breeding Osprey all nine years of Osprey Watch. It stayed only briefly. We looked for a mate but weren't successful. This is an early return for the Osprey. Last year, the first Osprey was seen on the platform on February 28 and the second a day or two later." (See photo below by Jan.)



Gary Carpenter recently photographed this **Bald Eagle** (photo above) from his backyard across the Colonial Heritage Golf Course. 🦅

NEW HAWKWATCH SEASON

By Nancy Barnhart

On March 1, Coastal Virginia Wildlife Observatory will begin its 25th College Creek Hawkwatch season near the confluence of the creek and the James River. On as many days as weather allows through May, between 9:00 am and 1:00 pm, CVWO volun-

teers will be counting birds crossing the James River headed north. The hawkwatch station is located at the second pull-off on the Colonial Parkway (site of the "James River" historical plaque) southwest of the bridge over College Creek. Visitors are welcome. 🦅

WBC EFFORTS ON BEHALF OF HRBT SEABIRD COLONY

In 2019 and early 2020, as proposed improvements to the Hampton Roads Bridge Tunnel advanced, the WBC was instrumental in advocating that state officials mitigate the effect the highway project would have on Virginia's largest seabird colony, established beginning in the late 1980s on the South Island of the HRBT. Ultimately, just in time for a successful spring 2020 nesting season, the Commonwealth implemented a multi-agency effort to relocate the colony to nearby Fort Wool and adjacent barges. Following discussion of the Commonwealth's successful efforts by the WBC Board at its November meeting, Board members Shirley Devan and Ann Carpenter collaborated to write and send a letter thanking the responsible state officials for taking action and expressing our club's support for the further efforts that will be needed to protect the bird colony long-term. Dated January 8, 2021, the letter was directed to Governor Ralph Northam, Secretary of Natural Re-

sources Matthew Strickler, Secretary of Transportation Shannon Valentine, Transportation Commissioner Stephen Brich, Department of Wildlife Resources Executive Director Ryan Brown, DWR Assistant Director for Wildlife Diversity Becky Gwynn, DWR Coastal Biologist Ruth Boettcher, DWR Lands and Access Manager Stephen Living, and Virginia Tech Professors Sarah Karpanty and Dan Catlin. Signed by WBC President Cheryl Jacobson, the letter reads, in part: "Thank you for your leadership and commitment to the immediate need for conservation of nesting sites for the returning seabirds and to the long-term protection of birds in the Commonwealth. We understand that because of the historical significance of Fort Wool, the Commonwealth in the future will be seeking a means to provide alternative permanent nesting habitat for the HRBT seabird colonies. The Williamsburg Bird Club looks forward to supporting you in these efforts." 🦅



2021 Williamsburg Bird Club Membership Form

Name		
Address		
City	State	Zip
Email	Phone	

_____ Please send me the full color version of the newsletter by email at my email address above.

_____ Please mail the black-and-white hard copy version of the newsletter to my home address above.

Membership _____ New _____ Renewing

_____ Individual \$20

_____ Family \$25

_____ Patron \$35

_____ Student \$5

I wish to make a contribution to:

\$_____ the Ruth Beck & Bill Sheehan Ornithological Research Grants Fund for W&M Students

\$_____ the Bill Williams Nature Camp Scholarship Fund

\$_____ the Child Development Resources Seed/Feeder Fund

Make your check payable to the Williamsburg Bird Club and mail to:

Williamsburg Bird Club
P.O. Box 1085
Williamsburg, VA 23187

Your membership dues and additional contributions are important to the mission of the Williamsburg Bird Club. Thank you!

If you have questions about your membership, contact Membership Chair Jeanette Navia,
jnavia@gmail.com

The Williamsburg Bird Club is exempt from federal income tax under 26 U.S.C. Section 501(c)(3) and is a non-profit organization eligible to receive tax deductible donations.

A financial statement is available on request from the VA Office of Charitable and Regulatory Programs



Williamsburg Bird Club
PO Box 1085
Williamsburg, VA 23187

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/>