



The Flyer

Newsletter of the Williamsburg Bird Club

Vol. 48 No. 4

www.williamsburgbirdclub.org

April 2024



PRESIDENT'S CORNER

By Nancy Barnhart

Spring greetings! We made it through March and its usual range of weather. The month included clear skies for a great field trip to Machicomoco State Park. Thank you to Deborah

Humphries and George Martin for leading and planning this always "birdy" trip. Unfortunately, our monthly gathering for a bird walk at New Quarter Park was rained out, but our popular hybrid monthly meeting made up for it with an outstanding presentation from Dr. Dan Cristol (see Cathy Millar's recap later in this newsletter).

We're moving into the exciting period of spring migration, one of the greatest phenomena in the natural world. For birds it's a perilous season. All the threats, many man-made, that birds face are magnified during this demanding time. Arriving on breeding territory, they are running directly into the face of lost habitat.

One way that man-made disturbance can actually help birds is with the establishment and maintenance of early successional habitat. This habitat is characterized by open land with a natural ecological succession of plants that will eventually advance from grasses, annuals, forbs, to perennials, small trees, and eventually large trees. The birds that require the open, scrubby habitat need help from disturbances such as fire, or man-made activity to maintain its openness. There are a number of species that require this habitat and can actually take advantage of man-made changes. Northern Bobwhites, Blue-winged Warblers, Prairie Warblers, White-eyed Vireos, Yellow-breasted Chats, and Mourning Warblers are just a few species utilizing early successional habitat.

A Mourning Warbler will overwinter in thick, brushy habitat as far south as Venezuela or Columbia. This sturdy yellow and gray-hooded bird will fly at night to avoid predators. Along the way these birds will look (Continued on Page 2)

UPCOMING PROGRAMS

By Patty Maloney

April 17, 7:00 p.m. (at the Quarterpath Recreation Center and via Zoom): Presentations by W&M students awarded the Bill Sheehan/Ruth Beck Ornithology Research Grants by the WBC.

Join us on Wednesday, April 17, at 7:00 p.m. at the Quarterpath Recreation Center (Room 2, 202 Quarterpath Road, Williamsburg) or via Zoom. Three William & Mary students who received ornithology research grants from the WBC will present updates on their outstanding research projects:

- Cara Hall, "Investigating the effects of experimental lead exposure on movement activity in House Sparrows."
- Alina Grossweiner, "All that glitters is not water: Exploring polarized light-based attraction to solar panels in birds."
- Julianne Abenoja, "Pinpointing the source of avian mercury contamination in the Shenandoah River watershed."

Save the Dates:

- May 15, 7:00 p.m., presentation by Nancy Barnhart on her birding adventure in India.
- June 26, 6:00 p.m., outdoor gathering at the Chickahominy Riverfront Park with updates on the Purple Martin Project by Cheryl Jacobson and the project team. 🐦



Mourning Warbler. Photo by Nancy Barnhart.

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Golden-winged Warbler. Photo by Nancy Barnhart.

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for similar places for stopovers. The majority of Mourning Warblers will head to northern New England and the boreal forests of Canada for breeding. Some will stop in parts of Bath and Highland counties here in Virginia where they find the same thick, low, brushy vegetation they prefer for nesting. Upon arrival in the boreal forests they can find their preferred habitat in breaks in the forest created by logging, mining, oil and gas extraction, dams, and fires.

Right here in Virginia work is being done by various organizations to create and maintain early successional habitat. The Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources (DWR), along with the Virginia Society of Ornithology, is leading the way with its efforts to maintain breeding habitat for the Golden-winged Warbler, a species of greatest concern in the state. DWR is maintaining the brushy, bramble habitat that these birds require and finding success at the Highland Wildlife Management Area. To learn more about the DWR work on habitat for this beautiful species go to the following link: <https://dwr.virginia.gov/wildlife/information/golden-winged-warbler/>.

Early successional habitat will continue to be hard to find without purposeful planning and maintenance of this specialized environment. Lucky for us to have the beautiful Golden-winged and Mourning warblers finding what they need to breed in our state and to have good people working to keep it that way.

Happy Birding! 

Join the WBC on our

SPRING BIRD COUNT SUNDAY, APRIL 28

Contact Jim Corliss (jcorliss240@cox.net)
for more information about how to participate
on a team or from your backyard.



WBC MEMBERSHIP

Please extend a warm welcome to our newest members: Dave and Deb Richards and Patricia and Ronald Bracy.

If you still need to renew your membership for 2024, you can do so online at <https://williamsburgbirdclub.org/renew/> either using PayPal or by printing a membership form from that page which you can then mail in with a check. The form can also be printed from Page 9 of this newsletter. We encourage you to choose to receive our newsletter only by email when you pay your dues. This will allow our club to direct more of our income to programs and projects and less to printing and mailing. 🐦

BIRD WALKS: NEXT WALK ON APRIL 27

Our monthly bird walk for March was cancelled because of rain, but our next walk at New Quarter Park will be on Saturday, April 27. Meet the group in the parking lot by the park office at 8:00 a.m. 🐦

FIELD TRIP REPORT: BIRD NEWPORT NEWS PARK WITH US ON APRIL 20

By George Martin

Saturday, March 16 – Machicomoco State Park

Fifteen birders, led by Deborah Humphries, had a fine morning at Machicomoco State Park on Saturday, March 16. The group started in the parking lot past the pay station, observing the large open field where a flock of gulls included a few Bonaparte's. Then a swarm of Dunlin and Black-bellied Plover flew in to join the scattered Killdeer. On the trail near the campground, Field Sparrows were abundant, and a Brown Thrasher was singing loudly from the treetops. Along the York River were Brown Pelican and Forster's Tern. A few high-soaring raptors included a Northern Harrier. At the end of the trip, a few birders appended their sightings of Eastern Meadowlark and Horned Lark to the main checklist. The 61 total species observed can be reviewed on the [eBird Checklist](#).

Saturday, April 20 – Newport News Park

The next field trip will be to Newport News Park ([13560 Jefferson Avenue](#)) on Saturday, April 20. Jason Strickland will lead us on a walk which usually features a mix of early migrants and late lingerers. We'll meet at the parking lot by the ranger station at 8:00 a.m. and bird most of the morning. Last year, the group identified 55 species, including Red-headed Woodpecker, Blue Grosbeak, and three flycatcher species.

Saturday, May 18 – Chippokes State Park

On Saturday, May 18, we'll take our last field trip of the season to Chippokes State Park in Surry County. This trip will require a ride on the Jamestown Ferry. More details, including which ferry to catch, will follow. 🐦



Sixty-one species were seen by WBC birders on the March 16 field trip to Machicomoco State Park in Gloucester County. Pictured from left, kneeling, are Cindy Sherwood, Liz George, Deborah Humphries, and Marc Thibault. Standing, from left, are Nancy Barnhart, Sue Mutell, Joyce Lowry, Rose Ryan, Hugh Beard, Babs Giffin, Ann Carpenter, Gary Carpenter, Heide Young, and Donna McAdams. Photo by George Martin.



Views from the Machicomoco State Park field trip. Counterclockwise from upper left: Northern Mockingbird and Osprey photographed by Cindy Sherwood; group photo taken by field trip leader, Deborah Humphries.

HOW DOES THE SUPERFUND LAW PROTECT BIRDS?

Summary by Cathy Millar

At the WBC's March 20 meeting, our very own Dr. Dan Cristol, Chancellor Professor of Biology at W&M, where he has taught for 28 years, delivered an important presentation about his personal experiences with the Superfund law. Driven by his lifelong fascination with birds, Dan has studied avian behavior and ecology and is best known for his work on migration, cognition, and the effects of pollution.

To emphasize how birds need our help, Dan discussed a number of serious threats birds are facing: cats, deer, collisions, climate change, hunting/poaching, invasive plant species, energy extraction, habitat loss, and pollution. The following are just a few of the takeaways from this section of Dan's presentation. Free-roaming house cats, which kill more than a billion birds per year in North America, could be addressed by nurturing a culture that encourages folks to keep their cats indoors. There is a need for containment of deer to prevent their denuding the understory growth in forests, where many bird species nest and find insects to feed their brood. Special films are available that can be applied to urban buildings and private residences to prevent bird window strikes that kill many hundreds of millions of birds in the U.S. each year. Climate change is currently hitting salt marsh nesting species the hardest, as sea level rise forces them out of nesting areas, but climate change will eventually affect all species. The biggest threat to birds is habitat loss or degradation, which has been responsible for a 30% decline of our bird population over the last 50 years.

The rest of Dan's presentation was more upbeat as he explained what he is doing to help birds. For the last 20 years, his research has been centered on the effects of pollution on birds because, unlike climate change and habitat loss, that can be addressed more readily right now. To date, Dan has conducted research along contaminated portions of six rivers (Shenandoah, Mississippi, Penobscot, Hudson, Passaic, and Christina) and documented the effects of pollutants such as PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls), mercury, [Kepone](#), dioxin, and creosote.

Dan's first pollution study was on the 100 miles of the South and South Fork Shenandoah rivers in Virginia where DuPont's acetate fiber (rayon) factory in Waynesboro had leaked mercury, a neurotoxin, in the 1930s and 1940s. Beginning in 2005, Dan led several teams of students to document how mercury entered the food chain and the resulting impact to wildlife, especially birds, along both rivers and thousands of

acres of associated floodplain. Dan and his students also conducted related control studies in W&M's avian lab in Williamsburg. Through their work, they documented that birds contaminated with mercury have significantly fewer offspring. Further, offspring of Zebra Finches used in the control studies, who were never fed mercury at the W&M lab but whose parents were, still had fewer babies. Because of memory deterioration from mercury, the ability of adult birds to forage and migrate is affected. They also showed that mercury contaminated the land for up to 500 meters (roughly 5 football fields) inland from both sides of the rivers. Dan expressed gratitude to our club for the grants we annually award every year to selected graduate students to help fund this type of research.



Eastern Phoebe nest inside a sewer at a Superfund site in Illinois. Photo courtesy of Dan Cristol.

Dan also pointed out that as an element, mercury does not break down. Other than by the impossible, deliberate task of paving over the entire river and floodplain, the mercury released by the Dupont plant can be made inaccessible only by being slowly covered with sediment accumulated through natural processes over many decades/centuries. Because birds are a natural resource that belongs to everyone, the federal government threatened to sue DuPont
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over the harm it caused, and DuPont proposed a settlement of \$50 million to restore habitat for birds, fish, turtles, and frogs. Because the contaminated area itself cannot be restored, the money goes to creating bird habitat elsewhere by buying and reforesting nearby safe land.

The government was empowered to sue DuPont due to the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act ([CERCLA](#)), also known as “Superfund”, that was passed by Congress in 1981 in response to the public’s outcry when it learned in the late 1970s of the risks posed by toxic waste dumps, with [Love Canal](#), in Niagara Falls, NY, being the most notorious. Superfund allows the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to oversee identified toxic sites and forces the polluters to perform a Natural Resources Damage Assessment (NRDA) necessary to determine the appropriate type and amount of restoration needed to offset the damage done. For birds, this means how many are affected, their level of contamination, and how much restoration would be required to replace them, including those birds that would otherwise have been born. It also forces the responsible parties to either clean up or reimburse the government for EPA-led cleanup work. Because Dan and his teams had documented how many species of birds existed and what happened to their eggs and babies in the contaminated portion of the Shenandoah valley, a monetary value of \$50 million could be assigned.

Because of this success, Dan has now been focusing his research on conducting NRDA’s at toxic sites on

five other rivers. This involves conducting bird surveys and finding nests to take samples from eggs to determine the presence of the toxin and the level of contamination. Work takes Dan far afield. He and the former students he hires set up temporary labs to dissect and preserve egg samples in motel rooms where they also sleep. Because the samples are evidence for important legal cases, they are sent to government-approved labs. One of the recent results of his work is a settlement with a company causing mercury pollution on the Penobscot River in Maine that provides up to \$267 million to fund remediation and restoration. General Electric has agreed to pay about \$20.5 million just for the initial comprehensive study of PCB pollution on the upper Hudson River floodplain and is close to settlement. These settlements don’t cover the real cost of all the birds that are lost to pollution in each case. That would more likely cost a billion dollars. But they definitely make an important impact by restoring/preserving healthy bird habitat, which also brings back all the other forms of wildlife.

There is not enough space in this issue of *The Flyer* to report all the information that Dan shared with such infectious enthusiasm. He makes a very convincing case that the Superfund is a powerful law which, as long as it remains in place and funded, can bring back some of the birds we have lost to pollution. Please click on the following link to watch a video of the presentation on the WBC’s YouTube channel: <https://youtu.be/f51SBE09fw>. You’ve got to see the effective nests that Gray Catbirds are making from plastic bags in a very trashy part of New Jersey! 🐦



Nature Camp Scholarships

The Williamsburg Community Foundation (WCF) recently presented two grants to our club, one from the Jeanne and Mike Millin Fund and another from the Thomas Bosley McCary Fund. Both funds were established with the WCF to provide scholarships through the WBC for local students, grades 5-12, to attend Nature Camp in Vesuvius, VA. The Millin Fund was established by the daughter-in-law of WBC members Jeanne and Mike Millin in 2019 to celebrate the couple’s 50th wedding anniversary. Our late member, Tom McCary, established his fund, under the terms of his will, to support the Bill Williams Nature Camp Scholarships. Pictured here are Ann Carpenter, WBC Treasurer (on left), accepting the grants in the WCF office from Nancy Sullivan, WCF President and CEO.

VIRGINIA BIG DAY — MAY 4, 2024 — SUPPORTS VA BREEDING BIRD ATLAS

By Xavier Gitre

Heads up avid birders! On Saturday, May 4, 2024, you will have the opportunity to bird all day and raise money for the Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas project at the same time!

I'm Xavier Gitre, a young birder from Southwest Virginia. Last spring, I coordinated a birding big day in the New River Valley (NRV) to fundraise for conservation and build community. It was a success! Recently, I entered an American Birding Association (ABA) young birder program. One of the components of the program is a "conservation/community" project. For my project, I decided to bring the NRV Big Day to the entire Commonwealth. I've since assembled a committee to plan the event, including several young birders from across the state.

The outline of the Virginia Big Day is as follows. Virginia birders can register a team of friends to compete in one of several categories, including a youth category and regional categories. Birding clubs

may also register as a team and compete in their own "club" categories. Teams will have from midnight to midnight to see as many species as possible, but participation may be tailored to any birding style, from a few hours of yard birding to a statewide big day. Teams may collect pledges (e.g. \$2 per species) from organizations/companies or individuals, the proceeds of which will go directly to the Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas Fund. Furthermore, all registration fees will go directly to the project.

Registration for the event is now open. Visit the Virginia Big Day website at <https://vabirdingbigday.org> for full information about the event, including competition rules and pledging, and to register. Please direct any inquiries to virginiabigdaybirds@gmail.com. Let's see how many species we can get, and how many dollars we can raise for the Virginia Breeding Birds Atlas! 🐦

RECENT SIGHTINGS



Have you noticed that bluebird nesting is well underway? **Shirley Devan** shared this photo of three beautiful **Eastern Bluebird** eggs in the nest box she maintains at her residence in Colonial Heritage. The three eggs were laid March 23-25.



Cheryl Jacobson, Conservation Committee Chair and lead on the Purple Martin Project, reports that **Purple Martins** are beginning to return to our area from their wintering grounds. The project team has been busy preparing the gourds at the WBC's colonies for nesting by adding clean pine straw and opening the gourds. In the photo above, **Judy Jones** prepares the gourds at the colony located at the Virginia Institute of Marine Science. As of March 30, four birds had been seen at the Chickahominy Riverfront Park colony despite current construction activity in the park.

MORE RECENT SIGHTINGS



Deborah Humphries shared the photos above that she took on March 25 of an **American Bittern**, a reclusive species and stealthy hunter, that lately has been seen on the Greensprings Interpretive Trail.



The **Black Skimmer** pictured above, photographed by **Laura Mae** on March 19, was a first-of-the-year sighting of the species for Accomack County on the Eastern Shore (<https://ebird.org/checklist/S165412164>).



This first-of-the-year **Royal Tern** for Norfolk was sighted and photographed by **Laura Mae** on March 12 (<https://ebird.org/checklist/S164525562>).

RICHMOND FALCON CAM

Your editor's favorite nest cam is live again! Resident male and female Peregrin Falcons are using the nest box in the downtown Richmond business district for their fourth year in a row as a mated pair, and the female laid four eggs between March 18 and 25. Department of Wildlife Resources staff estimate hatching will begin sometime between April 24 and 26. A new camera with infrared technology and a new microphone provide clear video and audio of the nesting activity day and night.

<https://dwr.virginia.gov/falcon-cam>. 🦅



2024 Williamsburg Bird Club Membership Form

Name		
Address		
City	State	Zip
Email	Phone	

Your email will be used for WBC's email mailing list. You will receive announcements of upcoming bird walks, field trips, meetings, other events, and the full color email edition of the newsletter through this mailing list.

_____ Do you also want a b&w paper newsletter sent to your physical address?

Membership _____ New* _____ Renewing

_____ Individual \$20

_____ Family \$25

_____ Patron \$35

_____ Student \$5

*How did you hear about the Bird Club?

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

\$ _____ the Bird Club Conservation 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



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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 5% 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/>