

## **Williamsburg Bird Club**

*Wednesday, September 20, 2017*

Williamsburg Regional Library Theatre, 7:00 pm

**Attendance:** 120

### **President's Remarks:**

President Bill Williams opened the meeting with a greeting to everyone who'd assembled to celebrate the club's 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Folks came from as far away as Charlottesville.

He reminded us that the purpose of the bird club is to promote interest in the study of wild birds, to protect birds and their habitats and share the joy of birds with others. He noted that the 66 pieces of student art work hanging in the adjourning room and contributed by York County and Gloucester Public Schools students to recognize our anniversary was an excellent example of the club's public outreach. He thanked Deane Gordon for coordinating this effort and having the art work showcased in our 2 local bird stores and local libraries.

Bill related that when the club was formed in 1977, Mute Swans were nearly unheard of; Canada Geese had yet to nest here; Northern Bobwhites and Loggerhead Shrikes could readily be found locally; Brown Pelicans were rare anywhere in Virginia; Evening Grosbeaks and Pine Siskins were abundant in the winter and House Finches rare. Our club has formally chronicled and continues to chronicle the changes in our local bird population.

Bill highlighted how the Williamsburg Bird Club has contributed to community service and education in those 40 years as follows:

- Held over 370 monthly meetings.
- Conducted over 450 field trips.
- Provided more than 250 bird related resources to the local public library.
- Conducted a highly successful bird seed sale.
- Awarded a total of \$35,585 in ornithological research grants to 72 graduate students since 1982.
- Provided 21 Nature Camp Scholarships since 2008.
- Created and monitored Eastern Bluebird and Purple Martin projects.
- Held 40 Christmas and Spring Bird Counts.
- Hosted the 1987 and 1995 VSO annual meetings.
- Served as Early Risers Bird Walk leaders for the annual Colonial Williamsburg Garden Symposium.
- Provided feeders and bird seed for the Child Development Resources Center.
- Coordinated highway cleanup along a 3 mile stretch of historic Rte. 5 for more than 20 years.
- Produced The Birds of Colonial Historic Triangle Annotated Check List in 1998 and 2012.
- Conducted once monthly or twice monthly bird walks at New Quarter Park since June 2005.
- Conducted a nature camp for adults in 2006.
- Ran spring and fall banding studies at Population Ecology Laboratory on South Henry St. for many years.
- Been involved in Prothonotary Warbler nest box monitoring studies.

- Monitored beach nesting colonial water birds on the Hampton Roads Bridge Tunnel, Grandview Nature Preserve and Craney Island.
- Have had seven current and/or former Williamsburg Bird Club members serve as VSO presidents.
- Have had WBC members be founders of the Kiptopeke Hawk Watch, College Creek Hawk Watch, Historic Virginia Land Conservancy, Coastal Virginia Wildlife Observatory and the Historic Rivers Chapter of Virginia Master Naturalists which was recognized 10 days ago as Virginia's 2017 Chapter of the Year.
- Worked with local schools on natural history studies.
- Taught Williamsburg Area Learning Tree ornithology courses and Christopher Wren Association bird courses for at least 20 years.

Club recognition was noted as follows:

- Bird club members Geoff Giles, Shirley Devan and Jeanette Navia have been featured in *Next Door Neighbors*.
- Our support of New Quarter Park earned our club special recognition by the York County Board of Supervisors in 2006.
- In 2015 our club was recognized by the College of William and Mary Alpha Chapter of Phi Beta Kappa with a Lifetime Learning Award.

Members affiliated with the club for 40 years are:

- Mitchell Byrd
- Fred Blystone
- Jim Booth
- Brian Taber
- Bill Williams

**Program-** The presentation was given by the legendary Dr. Mitchell Byrd who was introduced by Cheryl Jacobson, Program Chairperson. Dr. Byrd is Chancellor Professor of Biology Emeritus at W&M and Director Emeritus of the Center for Conservation Biology. He is widely published and has received numerous honors and awards including the 2007 Fish and Wildlife Service Recovery Champions Award for his work with Bald Eagles and Peregrine Falcons. And he was instrumental in the founding of our bird club.

Delivering a captivating 45 minute talk without notes, Dr. Byrd began by humorously noting that folks have often asked him if his name had anything to do with his getting interested in birds back in the 30's and 40's and proceeded to describe the sequence of events that led to his illustrious career in ornithology. His 1<sup>st</sup> pair of binoculars was an abandoned pair that his father had found and that weighed nearly "10 pounds". He remembered at age 14 seeing the sky black with Brant at Chincoteague. There were so many waterfowl that the bag limit was 15 per day with a requirement that 5 be Black Ducks. The sight of all those birds got him hooked. He continued to bird when he went to Virginia Tech and recalled seeing during spring migration a fallout of up to 15 species of warblers on a typical morning. Two weeks after graduation, the Army snatched him and put him in the Biological Warfare Laboratory where he was ordered to raise Oriental rat fleas on an artificial medium. 1956 found him traveling all

over the country looking for an academic job. He was driving through Williamsburg and found that there had just been a resignation at W&M and he was offered a job for one year that rolled into 50!

He was delighted to finally be able to work with birds. His first project was researching a parasitic disease in Wild Turkeys on game farms. He related injecting hens with prolactin to make them broody and that that was so successful that those that didn't have chicks would brood his feet which he described as one of life's great adventures.

After studying the release of exotic game birds in Virginia, he started developing a baseline for the populations of colonial birds on the Eastern Shore barrier islands. Four years later he'd written a report documenting what was on each island and submitted it to the Nature Conservancy. He likes to think that his report may have been influential in that eventually every one of those islands has come under the protection of the Conservancy, state or federal government. His observations had included Cattle Egrets who'd first nested there in 1961. After having arrived from Africa to Suriname and then Florida, they'd spread rapidly throughout the United States and at one point became the most abundant heron in NA with well over 1500 pairs in Virginia. It was found that they did not compete with native herons, yet for unknown reasons, their population everywhere dropped by 89% in one decade. The first White Ibis was seen nesting in 1977 and the population has since exploded whereas nesting Glossy Ibis are in decline.

While conducting those surveys he had noticed a decline in Ospreys and observed that the Ospreys in Williamsburg were also not producing offspring. A 20-year project resulted beginning with surveys documenting all the nests from the Potomac River to the James River. There were 400 breeding pairs at that time but most of the nests' eggs did not hatch. A study of the eggs revealed incredibly high levels of the metabolite of DDT. After DDT was banned in the US in 1973, the population began to expand and extend its range. He banded 2500 Ospreys including about 200 pairs who were color banded to identify the birds individually to study mate and site fidelity. He described Ospreys as the greatest collectors of junk in their nests including monofilament line and that he had to frequently cut free birds that were wrapped in those lines. Posters that they made warning of this danger and posted at marinas and coastal sites seemed to help for a while but the problem has returned to the previous level of concern. But Ospreys have made a remarkable recovery with now over 300 Osprey nests just on the James River. It is estimated that there are now about 10,000 breeding pairs in the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

With the passage of the Endangered Species Act, there were 3 species in Virginia of concern: Red-cockaded Woodpeckers, Peregrine Falcons and Bald Eagles. In 1978 Dr. Byrd was asked to take over a series of programs regarding those species. Describing the unusual behavior of Red-cockaded Woodpeckers breeding in clusters and nesting only in cavities of living pine trees at least 80-100 years old, he related spending a year searching the Dismal Swamp for them and eventually finding 28 places in Virginia where Red-cockaded Woodpeckers occurred with about 45 clusters. Over the next few years all those sites were logged despite his protests of the presence of an endangered species and finally just one place, Piney Grove, was left with only 8-9 birds. Upon his recommendation of proper land management, there is now a maximum of 63 birds. He noted an attempt 2 years ago to establish Red-cockaded Woodpeckers in the Dismal Swamp that has resulted in 2 pairs laying eggs with resulting 2 offspring.

The Peregrine Falcon project was more difficult as they'd been totally extirpated east of the Mississippi River. As a member of the recovery team, it was decided to establish a captive breeding program at Cornell to provide the birds for release into the wild. This was controversial because they obviously had

to use Peregrine Falcons that were not indigenous to the area but did share 90% of the genetic background. Using falconer's hacking technique, Peregrines have been successfully reestablished in Virginia with currently 31 nesting pairs in Tidewater. He was observing a pair nesting in the crow's nest of a mothballed ship when he saw they had a throat infection caused by a flagellate from eating pigeons. So he got a prescription for Flagyl from a veterinarian. When the pharmacist questioned the legality of a vet ordering a drug for a human, he said it was not for him but for a Peregrine Falcon. "Are you Mr. Falcon?" "No, a Peregrine Falcon is a bird." Whereupon she asked what his name was and of course he had to answer "Byrd!"

Starting in 1978, he began conducting Bald Eagle surveys which he has continued for 41 years in a row. Initially there were 32 nesting pairs in Virginia and for about 5 years there were no breeding pairs on the James River. The population began to slowly grow after the banning of DDT and this past year there were 272 nesting pairs on the James River alone. The James having initially had no Bald Eagles followed by a successful recovery provided a perfect site to study what causes a population to grow to a certain size and stop. Already by the 1990's the reproduction of eagles was beginning to decline. It was observed that the number of young adults was exceeding the availability of new territories for them to establish. These non-breeding adults were harassing the breeding ones which had been thought to be creating a negative behavior feedback mechanism that could eventually be a factor in stabilizing the population.

Whereas Dr. Byrd had frequently filled the auditorium with laughter with his tales of our own President Bill Williams as a young lad as well as his recollections of critters such as Beauregard the bull, Little Mitchell the southern flying squirrel who lived to a ripe old age of 13 and Lightning, the mouse that any man would be proud to own.

But he concluded on a very serious note of how the general population doesn't realize what is happening to bird populations all over the world. He believes we are on the verge of an environmental catastrophe and gave examples that 70% of boreal forest birds are endangered and that the population of almost all shorebirds is declining. The Endangered Species Act, he noted, has focused us too much on high profile species like the Bald Eagle and California Condor. He suggested it was time to focus on systems rather than individual species. He targeted improper land management a problem because no one refuge or protected area is designed to protect high levels of biodiversity. For this he wants to see really big pieces of land protected which he believes can be accomplished by tying together existing lands as best as possible. Noting that the problem with fragmentation of habitat is related to fragmentation of agencies dealing with habitat that have different objectives, it would require an unprecedented degree of cooperation. Giving an example of how it could work, he described that Fort A.P. Hill sits on thousands of acres and right next to it is a wildlife management area and a huge marsh with another big marsh across the river. Together they total about 90,000 acres in one continuum that could benefit from a coordinated management plan. Otherwise he fears a biological impoverishment in this country and the world that is neither biologically nor morally acceptable. He pointed out that we birders can help by getting a lot more involved in conservation projects and making sure our representatives hear our voices. He pointed out that conservation is more than protecting pristine habitats but protecting areas of biodiversity. Otherwise he warned that in maybe 25 years from now we won't be practicing conservation biology but instead restoration ecology.

The respect, admiration and affection for this remarkable man and his life's work were palpable in the standing ovation Dr. Mitchell Byrd received.

Inge Curtis illustrated his lecture with many of her outstanding bird photographs.

**Awards & Recognition for Service to the Williamsburg Bird Club** Bill Williams awarded Lifetime Membership to the WBC to the following people:

- Dr. Mitchell Byrd - no introduction was needed!
- Jim Booth – He attended the very first meeting of the WBC in 1997 while stationed at the Yorktown Naval Weapons Station. Even when transferred elsewhere, he paid his dues and got the newsletter. Now retired in Williamsburg, he's participated in Christmas and Spring Bird Counts as well as FeederWatch.
- Bob and Cynthia Long – In Bob's absence, Cynthia accepted the awards for both. Both active members for over 30 years, Bob served as club president for the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary and Cynthia helped establish a Northern Bobwhite habitat at New Quarter Park and has been the club's historian for many years. Both were members of this year's planning committee for our 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary.
- George and Val Copping – After George retired from the Army, he and Val opened in 1990 one of the first of 50 Wild Birds Unlimited stores in the country and the first in Virginia. Among many contributions, they began in 1994 a program that continues to this day of donating 5% of purchases made by members of the WBC to our club for the funding of annual W&M Student ornithological research grants.
- Tom McCary – Joining the WBC in 1983, he has served as VP of Programs and is currently the club's historian. His erudite book reviews were entertaining additions to many membership meetings and he has been a reliable leader at NQP bird walks.
- Alex Minarik – Not present. She has served the WBC in many capacities including President, Secretary and Member-at-Large on our Board of Directors and has led many field trips and is currently a valued member of the CVWO Waterbird Research Team.
- Lee Schuster – As an educator she implemented Project FeederWatch for her Toano middle school students and her services to the bird club include President, Co-editor of *The Flyer*, Christmas Bird Count compiler and for many years she has coordinated the club's annual purchases of bird related resources for the local public library. For past 3 years she's been the VA Dept. of Transportation's primary contractor for the colonial water birds monitoring team for the Hampton Roads Bridge-Tunnel.
- Dan Cristol – Chancellor's Professor of Biology at W&M, Dan has had a profound effect on our club. He has received more than \$2 ¼ million in research funding. Among many distinguished awards, he received in 2011 the first VSO Mitchell A Byrd Scientific Achievement Award. As our Program Chair, he's been an invaluable liaison with W&M coordinating monthly meeting space and organizing parking permits. He donates the stipend he gets for writing the monthly bird column in the Virginia Gazette to our club.
- Shirley Devan – Bill recognized her organizational talents, indefatigable energy and strong skills in technology as guiding our club through a period of renewal and revitalization as President for

6 consecutive years. She was also one of the founders of the Historic Rivers Chapter of Virginia Master Naturalists. In 2011, she initiated the Prothonotary Warbler Study on the Northwest River in Chesapeake that required weekly monitoring of up to 100 nest boxes. Continuing the Prothonotary Warbler Study, she's expanded it in 2017 to the Chickahominy Riverfront Park. She was awarded the WHRO's Community Impact Environment Award in 2012. She has served on the VSO's Board of Directors and is currently the Membership Chairperson. For our 40<sup>th</sup> celebrations, she acquired the lovely notecards, bookmarks and cloisonné pins featuring our club symbol, the Red-headed Woodpecker.

**40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary WBC Planning Committee:** Bill recognized Bob & Cynthia Long, Arlene Williams, Ron & Sylvia Giese and Virginia and George Boyles for organizing tonight's event and upcoming picnic.

**40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Picnic:** Bill reminded the gathering of the upcoming celebratory picnic at New Quarter Park on Saturday, Sept. 30<sup>th</sup> for bird club members and their families only. The festivities will start at 8 am with a bird walk followed by activities for young folks from 10 to 11:30 and a catered picnic starting at 11:30. Attendees are requested to bring a dessert.

**Morrison's Flowers and Gifts:** Bill recognized the shop for donating the lovely owl cake on the refreshments table as well as the corsage given Dr. Byrd's wife, Lois.

**Field Trips:** Shirley Devan, Field Trip Coordinator, reported on the following field trip:

- **Saturday, October 21:** Grandview Beach, Hampton, VA. Carpool at 7 am at Colony Square Shopping Center.

**Programs:** Cheryl Jacobson, VP and Program Chairperson, reported on upcoming programs:

- **Wednesday, October 18:** Bill Williams will give an illustrated presentation of the Birds of the Greater Antilles gathered from his experiences in conducting research in the Dominican Republic last December and birding in Puerto Rico this last March.
- **Wednesday, November 15:** Dr. Bryan Watts will give a presentation highlighting the programs they've been working on at the Center for Conservation Biology over the past decades.

**Nominating Committee:** Bill reported that a slate of nominations of club officers for 2018 has been drawn up and will be presented at an upcoming meeting.

At the end of the meeting a free raffle was held.

Bill adjourned the meeting at 8:30pm.

Refreshments were served in the Schell meeting room whose walls were decorated with the 66 pieces of student art work celebrating our club's anniversary.

Respectfully Submitted,  
Cathy Millar, Secretary Williamsburg Bird Club,  
September 24, 2017