

**Williamsburg Bird Club**  
*Wednesday, March 21, 2018*  
Andrews Hall, Room 101, W&M, 7:00 pm

**Attendance:** 51

**President's Remarks:**

President Cheryl Jacobson welcomed the assembly noting that we have more new members since December than ever before. Six responded to her request for new members to stand up. Master Naturalists have been one source of attracting new members as well as our monthly bird walks.

**Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas:** Cheryl reminded us that to finish the VBBA is a priority of the club for the next three years. Everyone's help is needed to atlas the remaining 22 blocks. She asked Geoff Giles to speak about one way we are going to try to implement further surveying.

Geoff reported that on April 13<sup>th</sup> there will be a session held at Freedom Park led by Dave Youker on how to enter breeding data on line in the Breeding Bird Atlas. Our April 21<sup>st</sup> field trip this month is to Chickahominy Riverfront Park that encompasses two priority blocks and will offer participants the opportunity to determine what block they are in and practice enter breeding activity in the correct priority block. We will also visit a private estate across the river that features a lot of breeding bird activity. The trip will be led by Matt Anthony at 8am.

On March 31<sup>st</sup> Geoff will be leading an 8am bird walk at New Kent Forestry Center's annual public Walk in the Forest during which Geoff will talk about indications as observed of breeding bird activity.

**Recognition of Volunteer Activity by Members:** Cheryl noted that there have been a number of requests for presentations via our club website and thanked Shirley Devan, Jan Lockwood and Lois Ullman for delivering them and helping the public learn about birds.

**The Flyer:** Cheryl reported that Melinda Cousins is reminding us that March 25<sup>th</sup> is the deadline for newsletter photos. Cheryl commented that there are photos being submitted from more members than ever before and to keep it up.

**Wild Birds Unlimited Donation:** Cheryl thanked Wild Birds Unlimited for the check to our club representing 5% of purchases made by WBC members.

**Recognition of Members Who've Signed Up for Priority Blocks:** Cheryl thanked Jan Lockwood, Rexanne Bruno, Shirley Devan and Jason Strickland for each claiming a block. She noted that Geoff Giles and Andy Hawkins have teamed up for one block and recommended forming teams as a fun way to participate. Starting in April and going through until the end of July, Jim Corliss will be leading a first Saturday breeding bird walk every month. Dave Youker will be telling folks at the April 13<sup>th</sup> training session why this data is so important.

**Special Recognition of Bill Williams's Service to our Club:** Nancy Barnhart, Liaison to CVWO, noted that 41 years ago Bill brought our club to life and served as our first president. In the same year, he also launched Kiptopeke Hawk Watch at Kiptopeke State Park on the Eastern Shore. Coastal Virginia Wildlife Organization (CVWO) maintains the hawk watch and every year hires a hawk counter. For the last two years that person has been Anna Stunkel who is also a very fine wildlife artist. In recognition of Bill's 2

major endeavors that continue to thrive today, Bill was presented with an Anna Stunkel original that was commissioned for Bill of our club mascot, the Red-headed Woodpecker.

**Program:** Judy Jones, Program Chairperson, introduced the guest speaker Dr. Dan Cristol, Chancellor Professor of Biology at W&M, who presented his 12<sup>th</sup> talk to our club. His talk was focused on inspiring us to write to our congresspersons to tell them to vote against HR4239 which attacks the Migratory Bird Treaty Act by first reviewing the increasing challenges birds are facing worldwide. He began by noting that he'd been Vice President of Programs when he first joined the club and was scheduling monthly speakers who presented different aspects of the dangers that birds face until, after a while, he was advised by the then president that the presentations needed to be apolitical and more uplifting. He had since complied but on this night, twenty years later, he was returning to those topics.

First on the list of major causes for the steady decline in the bird population was habitat destruction and modification. He explained that every acre of housing, crops or shops is an acre less of birds because the birds that bred there are forced out and there is nowhere for them to go unless they drive out an established breeding bird in another area. Other birds will not allow them to just squeeze in so the world's population of the species that had once lived there is gone! Only a few species that can live in urban and suburban areas actually benefit from development resulting in seeing more of the same birds.

Second cause is climate change that directly affects birds by the sea level rising which wipes out nesting habitats where the sea and land meet. Before humans impacted the landscape, marshes and beaches would move inland and back out in response to climate change cycles but now roads and houses have hemmed them in. As a result the most endangered birds are those that nest in salt marshes, beaches and oceanic islands. Bird colonies are already being wiped out. Another effect of climate change is on birds that live in the far north or those who live on mountain tops like kinglets and creepers that are gradually being squeezed out as the climate warms and their habitat moves further upward in response. Even if we dramatically decided to address climate warming, there is a huge lag time from all the carbon that has been released where things are going to get worse. How adaptable the birds are remains to be seen but it is changing how we protect them. Already much larger areas are needed to protect endangered species to allow for greater movement of plants and animals in response to climate induced change of habitat.

Third threat is invasive species which is an emerging one as the climate changes and species can live in places that used to be too cold for them. Examples were given that included nonnative mosquitoes that can carry diseases like avian malaria, competing nonnative species of birds, and plants that wipe out native plants that support bird life. This is playing out on a large scale in Hawaii. Invasive plants are the greatest concern but Dan gave a case of how Mute Swans that had escaped from people's ponds and become common here were ripping out all of the submerged aquatic vegetation so there was little left for migratory swans and ducks.

Fourth threat is pollution. Pesticides are the greatest concern. Historically there have been two previous waves of toxic pesticides that killed birds: DDT and organophosphates. The current wave of pesticides features neonicotinoids which is absorbed by plants making the entire plant including the pollen and nectar toxic to insects, including honeybees. Compared to the previous insecticides, it appears less toxic to birds and mammals but is causing a loss of birds due to a crash in insect

populations in areas where it is widely used. Dan noted that the pesticide companies are essentially self-policed as the EPA allows companies to test their own chemicals and present data that the pesticides are safe. This accounts for many chemicals being released and only years later do we find they are dangerous.

Fifth threat is the pet trade and illegal hunting. The pet trade is less of a problem now because about 10 years ago the threat of avian influenza shut down the markets in North America and Europe that were fueling the import of parrots from South America and has led to the ban of wild caught birds. However trade in birds still thrives in third world countries. Hunting in this country is not a problem as it is very well regulated. But many countries don't have any regulatory laws and many of those that do will not enforce them. He showed a disturbing photo of a truckload of dead songbirds that a pair of hunters in Lebanon had legally killed.

Sixth threat is outdoor cats that kill at least one billion birds in North America each year. Dan stated times have changed and it is no longer acceptable to let cats outdoors. He asked that we educate family and friends. Feral colonies of cats that are neutered and fed are still a major problem for birds.

Seventh threat is another emerging one as we build taller structures such as cell towers, wind turbines and building which results in the deaths of a million birds annually. He illustrated this threat with a photo of several hundred migratory birds that were killed in just one night in May 2017 by hitting a Texas office building. Lighted skyscrapers on coastal migratory routes are a major issue. The circumstances for such tragedies especially occurs during the period of migration when there is good weather when the sun goes down and lots of birds take off but bad weather sets in and forces them to fly lower and be attracted to lights. This happens many nights at thousands of towers and buildings during migration and there are only so many birds. They can't sustain this loss forever!

As if all the foregoing isn't enough, yet another serious threat has appeared. The eighth threat is happening right now as Congress is considering an amendment that would undo a major part of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. The bill is currently stalled but can slip through at any moment. The key part of the MBTA states: "It is unlawful to pursue, hunt, take, capture, kill, possess, sell, purchase, barter, import, export or transport any migratory bird or any part of a nest or egg of any such bird, unless authorized under a permit issued by the Secretary of Interior." Dan explained that it covers all birds, except nonnative species, as birds just moving from one yard to another are considered migratory in this case. Nests are protected only when active. 'Take' is the vague legal word in the bill that is being debated. Up until now, one was held responsible for 'incidental takes' wherein birds are killed by accident. The government has never prosecuted small incidental takes. But because of the MBTA, BP was held responsible for the recent oil spill in the Gulf that killed over a million birds and was successfully prosecuted and had to pay a lot of money to remake the habitat. A Liz Cheney Amendment has since been added to HR4239, the SECURE American Energy Act which is a bill seeking to free energy companies from regulations that would otherwise impede exploration and development especially on federal lands. The Cheney Amendment ends any enforcement of incidental take such as open oil waste pits, high tension power lines, wind turbines and non-target pesticide poisoning. The Cheney amendment incidentally applies to marine mammals and turtles. It also restricts future presidents from changing it without a new law being passed. Dan emphasized that the First Amendment protects our right to petition the government for redress of grievances and that doing so is a patriotic act regardless of political persuasions. Papers, envelopes and pens provided by our club were passed around as Dan

posted the names and addresses of our Congressmen and suggested talking points to include in our letters expressing concern about the proposed change to the MBTA. The written letters were then collected and later stamped (again courtesy of our club) and mailed. A total of 50 letters were written.

**Announcements:**

- **New Quarter Park:** Sarah Lewis, Park Interpreter at NQP, presented a charming slide show honoring and highlighting our club's 12 years of leading monthly bird walks every second and fourth Saturday. She expressed gratitude for our club's involvement and although our club will no longer be leading the second Saturday bird walk at NQP, she is thankful that we will continue with the fourth Saturday walk.
- **Importance of Data:** Cheryl noted that Dan's talk emphasized the importance of data because we need to document specific information about what's happening to birds. Bird walks, information entered on eBird and the VBBA are all important tools.
- **Refreshments:** Barbara Neiss, Chairperson of Refreshments, thanked the following people for providing the goodies at our feeding station: Mona Overturf, Cathy Flanagan and Katy Klausner. She asked for one other person to volunteer for April's refreshments.

**Programs:** Judy Jones, Vice-President and Program Chairperson reported on upcoming programs:

- **Wednesday, April 18:** The following W&M grad students who have received grants from our club in 2107 will present their research: Megan Thompson *Can Zebra Finches Avoid Eating Mercury*, Carly Hawkins *Human Influence on Ecosystems*, and Ananda Menon *Mercury, Silent Sperm Killer*. Dan added that the students work hard at their presentations.
- **Wednesday, May 16:** Susan Powell will present a review of bird markings and types of nests and other tidbits to improve our identification skills that will also help us collect accurate data for the VBBA.

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

Cheryl adjourned the meeting at 8:45 pm.

Respectfully Submitted,  
Cathy Millar, Secretary Williamsburg Bird Club  
March 25, 2018