

Williamsburg Bird Club

Wednesday, March 20, 2019

W&M Integrated Science Center, Room 1127, 7:00pm

Attendance: 38

President's Remarks: Judy Jones, VP and Program Chairperson, was standing in for President Cheryl Jacobson. Judy greeted the assembly and informed us that Cheryl wasn't present because she was recovering from successful surgery for colorectal cancer and was pleased to announce that lymph nodes were clean. Cheryl had asked Judy to remind us to have our colonoscopies because they do save lives. Judy further explained that Melinda Cousins, VP and *The Flyer* Chairperson, was scheduled to substitute for Cheryl but that she was home with her very sick dog.

And on top of all that, the scheduled speaker, Maureen Eiger, was home in Roanoke recovering from the previous day's emergency surgery! Judy reported that Dan Cristol had saved the day by getting Matt Anthony to prepare a program for our meeting about his doctoral thesis in just one and one-half days.

Program: Dan Cristol, Chancellor Professor of Biology, introduced Matt Anthony. Matt started birding as a boy scout at age 11. He earned his BA in Maryland and a MA studying Rock & Roll at Penn State. He came to W&M 4 ½ years ago to pursue a PhD in American Studies in Music. The strong birding culture at W&M and birding opportunities in VA renewed his interest in birding, and he switched his PhD topic to studying birders and birding history. The current working title of his thesis which is still a work in progress is *We Were Not Birdwatching, We Were Birding: Science, Sports, and Institutional Culture in Late Twentieth Century Recreational Birding*.

Matt reviewed the historical circumstances and events that shaped birding as we know it today. He pointed out the importance of documenting and understanding the activities and mindset of the past because they have a lasting legacy on the present and future. And yet, to date, there has been very little study of the birding community.

He noted birding as worthy of study because it has become an important part of our culture as reported in a 2011 study by US Fish and Wildlife Service that there were an estimated 47 million birdwatchers and 18 million active birdwatchers. Furthermore bird watching is contributing to environmental awareness and is uniquely at the intersection of science and recreation with a substantial involvement of amateurs in citizen science. Much of Matt's research is based on old issues of birding magazines as well as oral histories he collected across the country.

In the 18th and 19th century, most of the scientists interested in birds were wealthy amateurs who had the time to pursue natural history. But by the late 1800s the discipline of ornithology was working to acquire professional status. At the same time, more people began to pursue bird watching as a form of recreation partly in response to industrialization and urbanization having distanced folks from nature and creating a desire to reconnect. Birding was also promoted by leaders of the Audubon movement in the late 1800s to protest the hunting of birds to supply feathers for the millinery trade. At this time the Audubon movement and bird watching involved mostly women and bird watching was consequently viewed as a respectable middle class feminine activity. Also, birds had been historically studied and identified by shooting a specimen in order to document it. But in the 1920s-30s, the New England

ornithologist Ludlow Griscom pioneered that birds could be reliably identified 'in the field' by their plumage, behavior, etc. He also pioneered the idea that sight record of birds from amateurs provided valuable scientific data. He popularized the idea that bird watching could be a competitive activity as he was one of the first to conduct a Big Day wherein folks competed to see how many birds could be identified in one day. His style of birding appealed to a younger male audience. One of Griscom's followers was Roger Tory Peterson and in 1934 Peterson's **A Field Guide to the Birds** was published and became a runaway best seller in the midst of the Great Depression. Also better optics became available and the access to cars allowed people to travel to see birds.

By the 1950s, individuals and groups began emphasizing birding as either a sport or a science. While Stewart Keith did a Big Year in 1956, Howard Axtell of the Buffalo Ornithological Society was espousing scientific data and developing standards of verification and documentation as the most important aspect of birding.

One of the communities of birders that Matt has studied was in California during the 1960s where their style of birding placed emphasis on science and technical knowledge of bird identification as well as being highly competitive and social. The term 'birding' was becoming more common as 'bird watching' was considered too passive to describe folks who were getting out at the crack of dawn and sometimes driving great distances in all kinds of weather to see birds. One of the birders, Guy McCaskie, developed a method of predicting where rare species could be found and for the first time ever led field trips in pursuit of rare species. In 1970, the first successful bird records committee in the US was founded and their findings on identification, distribution and status were published in the journal, *California Birds*. Competitively, their emphasis was not on the highest count lists but on how much one knew about birds and how many rarities one found. In contrast, the American Birding Association founded in 1969 in Texas by Jim Tucker promoted the view that birding was a sport and the goal was to see who could build the biggest list, and publishing the scores. There was criticism in the 1970's by folks that this focus did not promote the study of birds and the ABA responded by evolving to include info about identification, habitat, etc. In 1979, the owner of a Mississippi forestry company, Jim Vardaman, decided to try to be the first person to do a Big Year and be the first to see 700 species. He admitted that birds really weren't his interest but viewed it as a challenge and promotion for his business. He hired top birders to plan the year and take him to see the necessary birds and eventually scored 699 species. The stunt generated more media attention on birding than ever before and was covered by Sports Illustrated, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal and CBS. A lot of folks were critical that he'd essentially purchased the record and that the resulting media coverage was presenting birding as a frivolous sport rather than as a serious pursuit. However he was one of the first people to build a national network to report rare birds and he published a newsletter that he sent to over 1000 people and bird clubs across the country. In 1951, the first guide of where to find birds east of the Mississippi was published by Olin Pettingill Jr. and followed by a western component in 1953. A much more portable and accessible guide to birds in SE Arizona was published by Jim Lane in 1965. Eventually the ABA took over publishing guides to birding hotspots. In the 1980s-90s a variety of advanced guides in bird identification were published in response to birders growing interest in demonstrating skill in identification.

Digital communication technology is now revolutionizing how we bird. For the first time, LISTSERV made equal access to finding location of rare birds available for free to everyone in a timely manner. The internet facilitated the rise of citizen science where observations can be submitted from the field as on

eBird. It also has raised birding ethical issues because now the sighting of a rare species can attract the attention of hundreds of people. There is some concern whether birding with digital devices in hand verges on being somewhat similar to Pokémon GO and separating us from nature.

Matt noted that another development in the interest in birding is the bird tour industry that started in the 1970s and became a booming industry in the 1980s. Tour leaders could now have a career based on their skill as birders. Ecotourism has exposed more people to more birds and in recent years has also partnered with local people to engage their interest in birds and conservation. But cynics are concerned that the pressure to produce birds can lead to excessive use of bird call tapes or disturbing sensitive areas.

Matt ended his presentation by exploring the relationship between birding and environmentalism. The initial rise of bird watching was a direct outgrowth of the conservation movement through Audubon. But in the 60s and 70s, birders wanted their own space which resulted in the ABA that was more about the sport of birding. Even as the ABA shifted toward emphasizing field identification and knowledge, it brought birding closer to ornithology but didn't embrace conservation until a major leadership change in the 1980's. In 1984, the New Jersey Audubon Society initiated the World Series of Birding wherein birders were sponsored to raise money per bird identified and the funds donated to environmental causes.

During this time, birders also began focusing on outreach and inclusion of beginning birders and underrepresented communities via sponsoring a variety of bird festivals. There is recent concern that birding itself should promote more sustainable practices like the Green Big Year wherein the competition is to see the most species of birds in a year without the use of fossil fuels.

Matt concluded by noting that many birders are moving from a narrow focus on birds to a broader interest in natural history. Birders are becoming more politically active to protect habitat or support legislation like the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Definitely climate change, rapid species decline and attacks on the natural world on all sides will be one of the central issues of birding in the twenty-first century. An appreciative club awarded Matt an honorarium of \$100.

Refreshments: Catherine Flanagan, Refreshment Chairperson, reported that the goodies were provided by Jan Lockwood and Nancy Barnhart.

Field Trips: George Martin, Field Trip Coordinator, reported the following:

- **Saturday, April 20th:** Great Dismal Swamp with Bob Ake as leader. Starting time is 7:30 am at the Jericho Ditch parking lot.

George reported that there were 10 club participants in the March field trip led by Dan Cristol to Back Bay and Virginia Beach where the highlight was an Iceland Gull.

Bird Counts/Walks: Jim Corliss, Bird Count/Bird Walk Chairperson, was absent. Judy Jones reported the following for him:

- **Saturday, March 23:** New Quarter Park led by Scott Hemler
- **Saturday, April 13:** Freedom Park led by Nancy Barnhart
- **Saturday, April 27:** New Quarter Park

- **Saturday, May 11:** Chickahominy Riverfront Park where we'll be joined by the Colonial Nature Photography Club to talk about birds and photography.
- **Sunday, April 28:** Annual Spring Bird Count is open to everyone to participate. We were told to contact Jim if interested in joining a team in the field. Also that observation of feeders provides valuable data.

Purple Martin Project: Coordinator Bill Vanzetta was not present. Judy reported that he would like to have purple martin houses in need of repair reported to him.

Judy also announced that the 25th Annual Purple Martin Day will be held in Louisa County on June 22nd.

Virginia Society of Ornithology Annual Meeting: Judy reported that it will be held May 3-5 at Mountain Lake Lodge. Rexanne Bruno reported that the speaker is VP of the American Bird Conservancy and there will be great field trips with good mountain birding. Further info is on the VSO newsletter or web site and will also be included in our next issue of *The Flyer*.

The Flyer: Judy announced that Melinda Cousins has set the last Sunday of each month as the deadline for submitting articles and photos.

Bill Sheehan and Ruth Beck Ornithology Research Grants: For the benefit of recently joined members and a reminder for us all, Shirley Devan reviewed the history of the ornithology research grants that we award each year to W&M graduate and occasionally undergraduate students. We will be hearing from the students who received the 2018 grants at our next meeting.

The grants began in 1982, when just 5 years after fledging, the Bird Club was financially strong enough to grant research scholarships to two biology graduate students at William and Mary, who were studying ornithology.

Since 1982, over \$38,000 has been awarded to 72 graduate and undergraduate students. The grants were originally \$500 and now they are \$600 each.

Captain Bill Sheehan was a Charter Member of the Bird Club, the Club's first Secretary, and the Keeper of local bird records from Day 1 in 1977. Captain Sheehan died in 2000 and passed his records to another Bill – Bill Williams

Ruth Beck was one of the founders of the Bird Club in 1977, along with Bill Williams. Ruth was a biology professor at W&M and a mentor and advisor to many grant recipients, along with Dr. Mitchell Byrd, Dr. Dan Cristol, Dr. John Swaddle, and Dr. Bryan Watts. Ruth Beck lived and breathed this bird club and gave it more than we can ever know. Ruth died in 2015.

Shirley asked that when the Club asks us to renew our membership each January, to perhaps add a bit more to our checks for these scholarships, remembering these 72 students and more importantly the students who will come after them. Our dues and donations will have an impact on their future as well as ours.

The 2019 grant recipients and their research are: Timothy Boycott on "Using acoustic signals to reduce bird collisions with human-made structures: An informed sensory ecology to open-air settings.;" Heather Kenny on "Investigating the interaction between human-caused noise and personality type in Eastern Bluebirds"; and Casey McLaughlin on "Using feather corticosterone to determine if wild birds are under mercury stress". They will be addressing our April 2020 meeting.

At our next April meeting, we will be hearing from the following three 2018 research grant recipients: Rachel Davis on “Impacts of mercury exposure on cell aging as measured by telomere length, in Zebra Finches”; Jasmine Parham on “The dietary transfer of methylmercury in the South River floodplain”; and Robert Galvin on “Comparing wading bird use between ‘living shoreline’ restoration projects and natural marshes.”

Programs: Judy, VP (Programs) reported on the following:

- **April 17th:** The three recipients of the 2018 research grants mentioned by Shirley will give us a report on their projects.
- **May 15th:** Bill Williams will report on the birds he saw on a recent trip to Guyana.

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

Judy Jones adjourned the meeting at 8:15 and refreshments were served.

Respectfully submitted,
Cathy Millar, Secretary Williamsburg Bird Club,
March 22, 2019