

Williamsburg Bird Club

Tuesday, June 16, 2020

Conducted via Zoom; Invited by Dean Shostak and presided by Cheryl Jacobson; 6 pm

Attendance: 30

President's Remarks: President Cheryl Jacobson welcomed the attendees on this first-ever members meeting held via Zoom to safeguard the health of members during the Covid 19 pandemic. She proceeded to follow the agenda that she had sent to the membership prior this meeting.

Donations Update: Ann Carpenter, Treasurer, reported on WBC donations for 2020 which the Board had voted to sustain at last year's levels and are as follows: Williamsburg Regional Library (\$200), Historic Virginia Land Conservancy (\$250), Center for Conservation Biology (\$250), Coastal Virginia Wildlife Observatory (\$250), Cloud Community Forest Conservation (\$500) and the VABBA2 (\$500). The club has also awarded four ornithology research grants. The fourth scholarship award resulted from Dan Cristol's special donation of proceeds he'd received from the VA Gazette for the birding columns he authors. There had been plans to offer two Nature Camp scholarships but that has been cancelled this year. This presents the opportunity to be more generous next year. There has been only one seed purchase at the beginning of the year for CDR which is closed for the rest of the year. A special donation of \$200 was made for the Williamsburg Virginia Birding & Wildlife Trail brochure.

Update of Breeding Bird Status at Hampton Roads Bridge Tunnel Construction: Gary Carpenter, Member-at-Large/Assistant Editor shared data he'd collected regarding the displacement of breeding seabirds on the South Island that has for years been the single largest seabird colony in Virginia. It is estimated that 15,000 adults and 10,000 chicks inhabit the island. 80% of Virginia's Royal and Sandwich Terns nest there. The island has supported the breeding of about 10% of the Gull-billed Terns and over 10% of Common Terns, Black Skimmers and Laughing Gull populations in the state. This was made possible by South Island's suitable habitat, absence of predators and abundance of food in nearby waters. Our late Ruth Beck who was one of the founding members of our bird club had provided guidance for the management of this site. Making the island suitable for the accommodation of equipment and construction to support the expansion of HRBT and boring of a new tunnel has made the island no longer suitable for nesting. A decision was made by DGIF to create new habitat in the area. They began providing habitat by converting the decommissioned Fort Wool parade ground on Rip Raps Island which is near South Island by replacing the grass with gravel and sand and removing predators. In addition, two barges filled with sand and gravel were anchored between the two islands. Decoys and sound recordings were used to encourage nesting on these new sites. Preparations were mostly completed by March. The birds arrived on schedule in late March and almost immediately began inhabiting the grounds and are already forming tightly spaced nesting sites. DGIF and VA Tech scientists will be monitoring the seabirds closely to evaluate their progress. Legislation has been drafted that focuses on protecting migratory birds from incidental take during HRBT construction. The VSO, National Audubon Society, American Bird Conservancy and local bird clubs, including ours, submitted comments in favor of these draft regulations. Although the comment period ended in mid- May, there will be more opportunities to provide input.

Cheryl added that our November program speaker will be from one of the DGIF staff who will share more data and an update on this exciting project. She noted that our club's involvement in letter writing and attending meetings to support the effort can make us all feel proud.

Tory Gussman – Acting Co-Vice President, Programs: Tory has been a WBC member for about 10 years and has agreed to help Dean with the new challenge and added work of the selection, developing and presentation of programs via Zoom as it is likely we will not be meeting in person for the foreseeable future.

The position being that of a Board member, a vote is required. Dorothy Kroenlein moved that Tory be elected Co-Vice President of Programs. Gary Carpenter seconded the motion and it was passed unanimously.

Community Cloud Forest Conservation Update: Cheryl received an actual visit 2 weeks ago (observing safe social distancing) from one of the people here in the US who works raising funds for CCFC. Like here, everything has been shut down in Guatemala due to Covid 19. The school is closed. They need funding for digital devices for their students so they can continue their education via virtual classes. Therefore, our donation of \$500 was most welcomed.

Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas 2 Update: Cheryl reported that Dave Youker had sent an email announcing that our club has completed all the priority blocks that were assigned to us.

Global Big Day Report: Jim Corliss, Bird Counts/Bird Walks Chairperson, thanked the 73 people who participated from our bird club and Historic Rivers Chapter of Virginia Master Naturalists. 184 check lists were submitted to our club's eBird listing. He noted that using eBird to compile checklists was so easy, efficient and possibly more accurate. Jim plans to talk to the sector leaders of our annual Christmas Bird Count about using a similar approach. He does think there needs to be a discussion about how to divide each sector into locations so that geographically the checklists would be correct. For example, would one checklist be submitted for an entire sector or per each locality. Shirley noted that her sector includes private properties, Freedom Park, Cranston's Mill Farm and the Lavender Farm and that she keeps a list of the birds per location which she has in past years submitted to eBird after giving Jim the numbers. She also shares the list with interested property owners to let them know what birds they saw on their location. She thinks the other teams could do something similar. Cheryl said they break the Kingsmill sector into two sections.

Jim hopes that we will all participate in Global Big Day again next year. Cheryl added that internationally there were 35,000 participants and 92,000 checklists last year and 50,000 participants and 120,000 checklists this year.

Purple Martin Project Update: Cheryl reported that Geoff Giles has a Memorial Fund and that his wife has decided to use the fund to support one Nature Camp scholarship and for the rest to go to the Purple Martin Project. There is currently enough money to buy two poles and baffles for two more Purple Martin set-ups: one at New Quarter Park and the other at Chickahominy Riverfront Park. After approval from NQP grounds crew, the equipment will be ordered and the poles erected by autumn. The gourds will be purchased next year.

Newsletter (The Flyer) – Mary Ellen Hodges Vice President/Editor: Mary Ellen reported that the deadline for the July newsletter is June 25th. Cheryl added that in an effort to add more education in the newsletter, there will be a request for one or two sentences added by photographers with their photos describing something about the species in the photo being submitted. There is interest in seeing how this works in the upcoming newsletter.

Field Trips/Bird Walks Update: Cheryl reported that the Board at the last meeting via Zoom had decided to continue to put these activities on hold due to concern about protecting our membership during this pandemic.

Riding The Wind by Brian Taber: Cheryl recommended reading this book while we are all traveling less. Brian is president of CVWO and the book was released in honor of CVWO's 25th anniversary. He has been a birder for many years and each one of the chapters is about a birding experience. She hopes to have Brian read a chapter at an upcoming meeting.

Program – Heather Kenney: Heather is one of last year's three ornithology grant recipients. She will be starting a PhD program in August at U of Colorado, Boulder where she will study Barn Swallow behavior. She reported on the other two grant recipients. Casey McLaughlin has one more semester at W&M finishing her project on using feather corticosterone to determine if wild birds are under mercury stress. Timothy Boycott is defending his thesis about using acoustic signals to reduce collisions with human made structures this summer and job hunting. Heather's research for the last 2 years has been about investigating the interaction between human-caused noise and personality type in Bluebirds. She reported that Bluebirds typically nest in artificial boxes that people have put out and are often located in places with a lot of human activity and resulting noise pollution. Researchers are continuing to investigate how much this noise pollution affects bluebird behavior and reproduction. A previous W&M study revealed that bluebirds in our area that nest in places with louder background noises raise fewer babies than those in quieter areas. Heather has been focusing on what exactly about the noise is changing their behavior. She is especially interested whether noise is affecting the timing of nest building and egg laying as well as where bluebirds decide to nest and to see if noise influences the feeding rate of food being brought to nestlings.

Last year she banded the bluebirds in her study of 25 nest boxes set in six parks including New Quarter Park, York River State Park which is a sample of a quieter place and Newport News Park which is noisier. This spring she found that about 40% of the pairs stayed together with last year's mate and returned to the same box. Of the birds that had a new mate, eight out of ten who returned to their previous year's nest box were the males. This is attributed to the fact that males are the ones that initially establish and defend a territory from other males to attract a female and that success in a nest box one year leads to the likelihood of selecting the same box again. Females have more flexibility because there is less investment in territory selection and defense and that they perhaps can do better by switching to a new mate at a different territory. Another study has shown that birds who choose new mates usually had high nest failure the previous year. Overall a total of 91 % of the banded birds that returned from last year returned to the same nest box. So it is exciting to think that it is pretty likely that those of us with bluebird boxes in our yards are seeing the same birds returning.

To study how noise influences the timing of nest building and egg laying, Heather set up speakers three meters in front of the nest boxes in February before nest building had started. Half of the speakers

played traffic noise recordings at 70 decibels during daylight while the other half were silent controls. Heather and her team of undergraduates checked the nest boxes every two days and recorded when the nests were first tagged by the males; when a nest was begun and completed; and which day the first egg was laid. Whether the box was subjugated to a noisy speaker or not made next to no difference to males claiming boxes around March 24-25 and trying to attract females. But there was an average difference of four days between the noise treated and the control boxes for when nest construction, which is mostly done by females, was completed. Egg laying was also delayed by an average of four days in the noise treated boxes. This important to know because bluebirds who can normally complete three or four clutches in a season may only have the time to complete two clutches per season in a noisy area. That can potentially lead to 50% difference in fledgling output in quiet versus noisy areas. Heather turned the speakers off after the first egg was laid. In another study where she left the speakers on, she found no overall difference in the feeding rate of hatchlings in the noise versus control boxes. The noise treatment was run only during the first nesting attempt. Heather concluded by thanking our bird club for helping fund her research and that she would invite us to her defense of her thesis on Zoom on July 22nd.

Next Meeting: Cheryl concluded the meeting with an announcement that our next Zoom meeting will be in July with Nick Newberry as our program speaker. He will be talking about the world of tracking individual migrating birds and will share web sites that anyone can use to track birds via their computer or smart phone.

Cheryl adjourned the meeting at 7:03 pm.

Respectfully submitted,
Cathy Millar, Secretary Williamsburg Bird Club
June 18, 2020