

Williamsburg Bird Club

Wednesday, August 19, 2020

Conducted via Zoom; Invited by Dean Shostak and presided by Cheryl Jacobson; 7 pm

Attendance: 81 locations with some having 2 viewers

President's Remarks: President Cheryl Jacobson welcomed our WBC members as well as Master Gardeners who were invited to the meeting to hear the featured presentation about native plants and birds which would be of interest to them since they consult with homeowners about what to plant. Cheryl noted that our next issue of *The Flyer* will feature member photos of birds eating berries and seeds and also bugs on native plants reflecting tonight's presentation about the value of native plants to birds. She announced hopes of having themes for future newsletters that will invite members to submit photos that reflect a recent or upcoming presentation.

Purple Martin Project Update: Dean Shostak, Co-Vice President Programs, reported that our September speaker will be Michael Bishop from Northern Virginia Purple Martin Initiative. Cheryl reported that there was enough money in the Geoff Giles Memorial Fund to buy the poles and baffles for a martin house at Chickahominy Park and another at New Quarter Park for which she has just received approval for installation. The supplies for the Chickahominy Park one have finally arrived after Covid delays at the point of manufacture. The plan is to get both poles in the ground when it isn't so hot but before hard frost since they are set into concrete.

Raffle via Zoom: Cheryl announced that in lieu of the raffle we normally had at the end of each meeting, we would have a raffle quiz consisting of a question from our last presentation (Nick Newberry's) and the first person to respond with the correct answer in the chat box would win the prize of Brian Taber's book, *Riding the Wind*, donated by CVWO and a 5 pound bag of birdseed donated by Dean Shostak. Tory Gussman was the winner of our first Zoom Raffle. Cheryl asked folks to pay close attention to this evening's presentation as there will be a raffle question from it at the next meeting.

Hawk Watch -Nancy Barnhart: Records /Liaison to CVWO: Nancy reported that the Hawk Watch at Kiptopeke State Park will begin on September 1. There will be a new hawk counter who is highly regarded and who will have a "safe zone" on the platform but visitors are welcome apart from that area, practicing social distancing and following Park regulations. The educators start the same day and the monarch butterfly biologist starts two weeks later.

Nancy also asked the membership to report to her via email any rare, late or early bird sightings as she is in charge of Bird Records. There are reports of some late breeding activity, e.g. nestlings and fledglings being fed by adults. She noted that shorebirds are starting to migrate and that on Hog Island a Ruff (only the 3rd on record) and a Long-billed Dowitcher (only the 9th on record in the Colonial National Historic Triangle Bird Records) were seen.

Upcoming August 28th Board Meeting: Cheryl reported that a major discussion will be how the club is being served during this pandemic and if there is anything that we can do better but safely such as limited bird walks. The Hampton Roads Bird Club is doing bird walks under the rule of no more than 8 people; masks and social distancing mandatory and no sharing of scopes, etc. To date, they have had

only 3 - 4 attendees. They are planning to do field trips in the near future. Not being able to car pool would be an issue for field trips. She invited the membership to email her with any thoughts/suggestions on this issue.

Report on Upcoming Speaker: Cheryl noted that our October speaker will be the author of *Cerulean Blues: A Personal Search for a Vanishing Songbird*, Katie Fallon. To warm us up for her presentation, Cheryl has asked Judy Jones to write a report on another one of her books, *Vulture: The Private Life of an Unloved Bird*, for the next issue of The Flyer. Judy highly recommended the book reporting that Katie captures her voice and enthusiasm in her writing. She presents how important vultures are in our ecology and the problems they are facing.

Program – Matt Bright: Tory Gussman introduced Matt Bright who is Conservation Manager at Earth Sangha, which is a nonprofit program founded in 1977 to preserve and propagate native plants and support local conservation efforts primarily in Fairfax County, but also since 2006 an international project in the Dominican Republic. Their volunteer-operated wild plant nursery grows 300 local species from responsibly-collected seeds, and they distribute over 49,000 plants per year to help restore native plant communities. In the Dominican Republic, they focus exclusively on tree production, distributing about 12,000 trees annually, including native trees for restoration projects and crop trees for low-impact agroforestry. Matt is a certified horticulturist and an Arlington Regional Master Naturalist, and his program, 'Plant Conservation is for the Birds', made a very strong case for planting native. He stressed that native plants that have been in the nursery trade for a while are not likely to have the same value to wildlife as native plants grown from seeds collected with permission in the wild. Those plants have coevolved with their surroundings resulting in greater genetic diversity and being more suited to the diverse needs of the local wildlife. Matt emphasized that herbivory (consumption of plant materials by animals) is the most important consideration in developing an ecological landscape. Insect herbivory is especially important. 90% of insects require a specific native plant host. The remaining 10% are generalists, yet will struggle to eat non-native vegetation. Research has shown that not a single larva of those generalist insects fed on only non-native invasive plants like oriental bittersweet, English ivy, privet, Japanese honeysuckle, multiflora rose, survived! Gardening for greater insect diversity is so important because 96% of bird species eat insects at some stage in their lives (esp. as nestlings). Also, many Asian shrubs have evolved in areas that are not in a migratory corridor, and their fruit has high sugar content but low fats, whereas our native shrubs produce fat-rich fruits that are important to fuel our birds' long migratory flights. In response to the steadily accelerating decline of flying insects, loss of habitat and diversity of plants resulting in a 25-30% loss among our bird species, the best each of us can do is to create resilient natural areas and foster gardens that create meaningful habitat for insects. He recommended protecting existing habitat first; remove invasive species from your yard; plant natives and stop the use of unnecessary pesticides. He noted that land that has not been totally degraded by heavy machinery, soil scraping etc. have an amazing ability of natural regeneration. Removing stressors like untenable land use, deer over-abundance, and big stands of invasive plants give surviving native plant communities, dormant native seeds, fungi and other living components in the soil a chance.

Matt noted the importance of corridors connecting habitats. He said that more home, school, business and public gardens, green roofs, balcony gardens and native landscaping help serve this purpose. Studies have shown that connected sites support diversity with 14% more species noted, and overall habitat recovery progressed two years faster than disconnected sites. Because many smaller songbirds

prefer nesting 5 – 15 feet off the forest floor, he noted the value of removing non-native vegetation and replacing them with native shrubs and understory trees. Matt recommended the Virginia Department Conservation and Recreation site <https://www.dcr.virginia.gov/natural-heritage/> as a detailed useful resource for information about every natural plant community that occurs in our state as well as local invasive plants. Matt avoided suggesting plant lists but recommended looking around to see what works and is doing well in one's area. He concluded that whether one gets involved in a large-scale restoration site or rehabbing a pollinator garden in a school, it need not be perfect. Anything done will be an improvement that will last to some degree, even if abandoned. In the question and answer period that followed, he noted that a 2019 study showed that most native plant sources in the marketplace are cultivars that are unsuitable for ecological restoration efforts aimed at reestablishing diverse, self-sustaining populations. Nearly 25% of cultivars of native species that had floral or leaf traits that differed from the wild one (such as purple leaf from species green one) compromised their ability to support pollinators and other wildlife. Only 3 % of cultivars received high suitability scores. Pollinators differentiate between cultivars even when they appear similar to the wild type and visit the cultivars significantly less frequently. Cultivar and wild coreopsis were used as an example. We were also urged to buy plants that have not been sprayed with neonicotinoids or other persistent pesticides.

He cited Douglas Tallamy's books, *Bringing Nature Home* and *Nature's Best Hope* as further excellent resources. Matt said he can be contacted at mbright@earthsangha.org for further info.

Cheryl Jacobson adjourned the meeting at 8:30 pm

Respectfully submitted,
Cathy Millar, Secretary,
Williamsburg Bird Club
August 22, 2020