

## Williamsburg Bird Club

Wednesday, October 21, 2020

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

**Attendance:** 61

**President's Remarks:** President Cheryl Jacobson welcomed the attendees which included members from the Cape Henry Audubon Society and representing The Community Cloud Forest, fund raiser Kathleen Burger in northern Virginia, and in Guatemala, Rob Cahill, founding director.

**Program – Kattie Fallon:** Tory Gussman, Co-Vice President, Programs, introduced Katie Fallon the author of VULTURE: THE PRIVATE LIFE OF AN UNLOVED BIRD (2017) and CERULEAN BLUES: A PERSONAL SEARCH FOR A VANISHING SONGBIRD (2011) and has taught creative writing at Virginia Tech and West Virginia Wesleyan College. She is the founder of the nonprofit Avian Conservation Center of Appalachia and has served as President of the Mountaineer Chapter of the National Audubon Society. Her presentation was called *Saving the Cerulean Warbler*.

Katie's interest in Ceruleans started at an Audubon meeting in early 2000's about the impact of mountain-top coal mining on them, and was reignited in 2006 when she learned that although it is perhaps our fastest declining migratory Neotropical songbird with an estimated population of 300 – 400,000, it was denied threatened status under the Endangered Species Act. The vast majority of their global population breeds in Central Appalachia from Pennsylvania to Tennessee with all of West Virginia, eastern Kentucky and SW Virginia comprising the heart of their breeding range. They prefer nesting on ridges in large tracts of mature to old-growth hardwood forests with gaps in the canopy and understory vegetation. Small birds weighing the equivalent of only two nickels apiece, they are difficult to spot and are a cause of 'warbler neck' as they usually stay in the canopy, foraging on small insects like caterpillars, spiders and leaf hoppers. Preferring sugar maple, white oak and chestnut oak trees, the female, by herself, builds on a horizontal branch over an opening about 30 feet or more off the ground, a cup-shaped nest using spider webs for cohesion. She lays three to five eggs which she incubates for about 12 days. The male helps feed the hatchlings, which stay in the nest for only 10 - 12 days. By early July, they are mostly fledged, and start migration not long afterwards.

The Cerulean's rapid decline is thought to be due to habitat loss along its entire breeding, migratory and winter range. Mountaintop-removal coal mining, which has slowed down over the last decade but still exists, blasts open massive areas in the heart of Cerulean breeding grounds that is very difficult to restore and reforest, and probably will never again be suitable for Cerulean nesting. As Ceruleans migrate, they cross the Gulf of Mexico and fly along Central America, stopping to rest and refuel, where again they deal with deforestation due to development and agriculture, especially coffee plantations. They winter along a narrow strip in the northern Andes in Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and northern Bolivia, where deforestation primarily for coffee plantations again is a problem. Kattie attended a conference in Colombia, where coffee growers said that they prefer not destroying forests, but in order to feed their families, they need a dependable and sizeable market in the US for shade-grown coffee. The growers like bird-friendly habitat because they need less pesticide and fertilizer when the birds eat the insects off the coffee bushes, and the forest trees improve soil quality and prevent erosion. The forest trees also have a favorable effect on climate change, as they sequester carbon dioxide.

Katie also visited the Cerulean Warbler Bird Reserve, a 545-acre oak forest in central Colombia that is the first preserve in Latin America dedicated to a bird that breeds in North America. The reserve has incorporated 37 acres of shade-grown coffee farms. And she was delighted to see children dressed as Cerulean Warbler in a Migratory Bird Festival parade!

On a personal note, Katie shared that studying Cerulean Warblers in the field contributed a lot to her healing after the shattering experience of having one of her students killed in the Virginia Tech shooting. Kattie concluded by listing what we can do to help. Foremost is buying certified shade-grown coffee from Central and South America, of which Smithsonian Migratory Bird Friendly Coffee is the gold standard. Shade-grown coffee is more flavorful as the beans have a longer time to mature. Kattie buys hers on line from Birds & Beans. We can also support alternatives to mountaintop removal coal mining; manage Cerulean habitat via guidelines of Appalachian Mountain Joint Venture (<https://amjv.org/about/>); and support organizations that fund songbird conservation research. She stressed that when we travel to see Cerulean Warblers (or all birds for that matter) we tell the locals the reason we are staying at their lodgings or eating at their restaurant, so that they understand that birds are good business. Katie reported that Sunset Field Overlook at mile 78.4 on the Virginia Blue Ridge Parkway near Peaks of Otter is a good site for seeing Ceruleans and a Zoom attendee stated that Thompson Wildlife Management Area off Interstate 66 near Front Royal is also a good spot to see breeding Ceruleans in Virginia.

Our Zoom attendees from Community Cloud Forest Conservation reported that 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade classes at the CCFC school are closed due to Covid but that has led to the availability of more time to plant trees to reconnect forest corridors funded by a large grant from the US Fish and Wildlife Service. She joined Rob in thanking our club for the generous donations we've made over the years.

**Programs – Dean Shostak and Tory Gussman, Co-Vice-Presidents:** Dean and Tory reported on the following upcoming programs:

**Wednesday, November 18<sup>th</sup>:** Sarah Karpanty PhD, professor at the Fish and Wildlife Conservation department at Virginia Tech will discuss this year's successful move of nesting seabirds from South Island to Fort Wool and other shorebird topics.

**Wednesday, January 20, 2021:** Bob Schamerhorn will deliver a presentation featuring his wonderful photography on web-footed birds.

**Newsletter – Mary Ellen Hodges, Vice President, Editor (The Flyer)** Mary Ellen Hodges reported that the deadline for submissions to the next Flyer is October 28<sup>th</sup>. She noted that there is still some room for a few additional photos and an article.

**2020 Christmas Bird Count:** Cheryl Jacobson reported that we are planning to do our local count on Sunday, December 20<sup>th</sup>. She announced that Audubon has set rigid Covid guidelines for participation. One is that we can't advertise when we are doing the count until mid- November because the then current state requirements will need to be reviewed to make sure we can comply. Audubon is stressing the safety of birders is more important than the data. Folks will conduct the count individually and Jim Corliss will provide an eBird site for the data to be entered. There will be no compilation meeting.

Cheryl Jacobson adjourned the meeting at 8:35 pm

Respectfully submitted,

Cathy Millar, Secretary

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October 26, 2020