

Williamsburg Bird Club

Wednesday, February 17, 2021

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

Attendance: 80

President's Remarks: President Cheryl Jacobson greeted the attendees of the annual joint meeting of the Williamsburg Bird Club and the Historic Rivers Chapter of the Virginia Master Naturalists.

Program – Dr. Bryan Watts: Rick Brown, president of the Historic Rivers Chapter, introduced the evening's guest speaker, Dr. Bryan Watts, the Mitchell A. Byrd Professor of Conservation Biology, and Director of the Center for Conservation Biology, who discussed his research in his presentation, *Tracking Whimbrel, exploring the secret life and conservation challenges of a migrant shorebird*. One of the larger shore birds, it has a global distribution. In North America, there are three distinct breeding populations: Hudson Bay, Mackenzie River Delta and the Alaskan populations. Beginning in 1993, Dr. Watts has been studying the Hudson Bay and Mackenzie Whimbrels that begin arriving in mid-April from a nonstop flight from their wintering grounds in the Amazon Delta area to the Virginia Barrier Islands, where, using their long-curved bills adapted to extract fiddler crabs from their burrows, they build up enough fat reserves to make their final flight to their arctic breeding grounds. They gain about 7 grams per day over their 3 – 4 weeks' stay, increasing their weight by about 50%.

Dr. Watts started by conducting flight surveys at about 50 feet above the ground, which revealed a 50% decline over a 10-year period, with a continued 4% annual decline. The urgency to find the cause led to setting up a field site in 2007 at Boxtree Creek in Machipongo on the Eastern Shore to catch, apply coded leg bands, and take a variety of measurements in an air-conditioned van that protected the birds from overheating. He noted that Whimbrels are very skittish and that catching them requires remotely setting off rocket launched nets in the marsh from an offshore boat. Applying glue-on digital transmitters to study local movement patterns, they discovered that individuals returned year after year to specific creeks, which highlighted the importance of protecting those areas. In 2008, Whimbrel Watch at Boxtree dock was begun wherein anyone who is interested can witness Whimbrels taking to the air in V formation, filling the air with their contact calls as they make their final nonstop 4–5-day flight to their breeding grounds. About 80% leave about two to three hours before dark between the 23 and 26th of May. A sister Whimbrel Watch in Toronto has documented the same birds passing over Toronto by morning showing them to have already covered over 475 miles overnight!

A four-year study indicated that the Mid-Atlantic staging grounds continues to provide ideal resources and were not part of the decline. Seeking to identify where the birds were encountering problems, Watt's team deployed solar powered satellite transmitters attached to the birds via a leg-loop harness, and have tracked 50 birds over their entire migratory route over the last 12 years. One of the Whimbrels became the celebrity, "Hope," whose movements were followed globally on her website and was immortalized in the book, HOPE IS HERE. Her celebrity status prevented her wintering spot on Great Pond in St Croix from being developed for condos. Tracking revealed that Whimbrels faithfully return to specific breeding, staging and wintering spots. It also showed that after breeding, the Mackenzie birds stage in Atlantic Canada for 3-4 weeks and then fly 6,000 km nonstop over open ocean in an outward curve to avoid most hurricanes on route to Brazil. The Hudson Bay birds make their final stage along the Virginia to Georgia coastline and then fly 3500 km straight over the Caribbean Islands and often through hurricanes to Brazil.

Research on the arctic breeding grounds has revealed no problems. But they did find that staging areas presented difficulties. Watts and his team have identified a few critical spring roosting sites along our

southeast coast that need protection from human disturbance. In Whimbrel staging grounds in Atlantic Canada, blueberry farmers who'd expanded their farms into a 100-million-dollar industry were fighting off hungry birds with a variety of devices. A 3-year study led by Watts revealed that the farmers were wasting more berries during harvest than the birds were eating and are working with the Canadians to establish an outreach education program to alter the farmers' perception.

The major factor in Whimbrel decline has been identified on Caribbean Islands, especially the French ones, where, when hurricanes force exhausted Whimbrels and other migrants down on the islands, they are shot for sport after the storm passes. Mangroves have even been cleared for easier shooting and in France, hunting these migrants is advertised as a tourist destination. In one field in Barbados, 3,000 birds were shot in one day! It is estimated that one to two thousand birds are shot for sport per year on these islands. Watts has been working with Fish and Wildlife Service to work with these other countries to alter hunting practice. Already there have been some bag and season limits enacted and the Red Knot is on a no-hunt list.

Dr. Watts concluded that the Whimbrel project having started in Virginia has led to a need for an international effort. That research is only 5% of the solution. The other 95% is finding economic incentive for conservation and engaging people of different cultures and educating their children to understand the importance of their location that they share with Whimbrels. The First Lady of St Croix bought and distributed the book, HOPE IS HERE, to the 4th graders on the island. Dr Watts also purchased this book with the help of a foundation for distribution to 4th graders on the Eastern Shore where Hope had staged every spring. For 2 years, he gave talks to these 4th graders. The program has been continued by the Nature Conservancy, and there is an ongoing effort to link those schools with those in St. Croix.

Cheryl Jacobson thanked Dr Watts for his impressive presentation and all his research on the behalf of birds and said the club would explore how the club could help educate the public about this issue.

Announcements: President Cheryl Jacobson asked the leaders of the following four programs to give a five-minute presentation about each program and how we can help.

- **Osprey Watch by Catherine Flanagan:** Cathy announced that the Osprey will be arriving around the end of February and the beginning of March. The Tidewater Osprey population was down to 500 pairs before DDT was banned. W&M hosted the first ever Osprey Conference and researchers presented their findings about environmental contaminants. As a member of that committee, Dr. Mitchell Byrd is cited as having alerted the world to the dangers of DDT. He tagged about 3500 Osprey and built many nest platforms. There are now an estimated 10,000 pairs in the Chesapeake Bay watershed area and are classified as of Least Concern. Dr. Watts was a graduate student of Dr. Byrd, and in partnership with W&M and VCU, they started Osprey Watch. The data collected is used to monitor breeding pairs and issues facing aquatic ecosystems including global climate change, depletion of fish stock, and environmental contaminants. She noted that anyone is invited to join this group and become a monitor by registering on line and finding a nest to monitor. Local meetings are held to coordinate efforts. Volunteers also participate in public education efforts.
- **Description of Four Citizen Science Projects by Jeanette Navia:** Jeanette reported on the following four data collecting and reporting projects that we can become involved in.
 - **Feeder Watch:** This is an annual event sponsored by Cornell Lab and Birds Canada that operates from November to April. There are about 20,000 participants nationwide. It involves folks of all ages and levels of expertise counting all the birds seen for as long as desired in two consecutive days per week around one's feeders and yard and entering

the data on the project website. There is an \$18 fee because the sponsors are nonprofit organizations.

- Great Backyard Bird Count: This annual event is held over a four-day weekend in February. Participants count all the birds they see for at least 15 minutes per day and enter the data on eBird.
- Christmas Bird Count: This has been sponsored by Audubon since 1900. It was started as an alternative to shooting birds for sport. From mid to late December, people all over the world get together in groups and count birds in a specified circle. The Williamsburg bird circle is 15 miles in diameter and centered at the Williamsburg Visitors Center. It is divided into 11 sectors with groups of 2 – 6 people counting all the birds in a sector. Feeder watchers within that circle are also invited to participate. The birds are tallied in one list that is maintained by the club's official chairperson of bird counts. WBC has been participating since 1977 when the club was founded. There are records from local participants before that dating back to the 1940's and 50's.
- Williamsburg Spring Bird Count: This count uses the same diameter circle and the same eleven sectors as the CBC and also includes feeder watchers within the circle. The data is submitted into a data base that the WBC keeps to monitor the local bird population from year to year. The first one was conducted in May, 1978.
- Purple Martin Project by Shan Gill: Shan gave a summary about the bird and their life cycle noting that during migration, they can fly 360 miles per day. The Williamsburg Bird Club's first Purple Martin Committee in 1978, banded 600 Purple Martins locally. He reported that the WBC and Historic Rivers Chapter of Master Naturalists are prepared for the arrival of Purple Martins this year by having installed four poles with nesting gourds at York River State Park, New Quarter Park, Chickahominy Waterfront Park and Virginia Institute of Marine Science.
- Bluebirds by Connie Reitz: Connie and Judy Jones are county coordinators who report data that is gathered from our local bluebird trails to the Virginia Bluebird Society. Our area covers Williamsburg, Poquoson, Newport News, York County and James City County. The Eastern Bluebird population declined by an estimated 90% between 1920 and 1975 mostly due to nest cavity competition from European Starlings and English Sparrows. They have since made a remarkable recovery via the establishment of nest boxes on Bluebird Trails and now the North American Bluebird Society states the Eastern Bluebird numbers are stable and healthy. In the 1980's, the WBC took the lead to establish Bluebird Trails in our area. In 1984, Leigh Jones and Bob Morris initiated a bluebird box building campaign resulting in 230 nest boxes along 19 area trails in the following two years. In the 1990's, Greg Millsagle started erecting bluebird houses at New Quarter Park. Shirley Devan and other WBC volunteers monitored bluebird boxes in York River State Park for 5-8 years. The WBC continues to support the bluebird trail at Waller Mill School.

Cheryl commented that this proves what impact our club can have when we get involved with the needs of a bird species.

In Memory: Cheryl noted that the WBC has lost two of its members that were past officers: Geoff Giles in February 2020 and Tom McCary in January 2021. Historic Rivers Master Naturalists lost Page Hutchinson this February. Shirley Devan delivered a tribute to Page whose occupation included working for the Department of Forestry at New Kent Forest Center where

she was their educational environmental leader for all things related to trees. She emphasized what a highly skilled educator Page was for both adults and children. She was an advisor to the Historic Rivers Master Naturalist Chapter.

Dean and Cheryl adjourned the meeting at 8:26 pm.

Respectfully submitted,
Cathy Millar, Secretary Williamsburg Bird Club
February 19, 2021