

## **Williamsburg Bird Club**

September 15, 2021

Conducted via Zoom; invited by Ann Carpenter and presided by Cheryl Jacobson, 7 pm

**Attendance:** 48

**President's Remarks:** President Cheryl Jacobson welcomed the attendees and introduced the speaker, Dr. Bryan Watts.

**Program – Dr Bryan Watts:** At our September meeting, we learned from Bryan Watts, Director of the Center for Conservation Biology and Mitchell A Byrd Research Professor at W&M, about what he described as one of the most challenging species the CCB has worked with: the Eastern Black Rail. A small ground-nester measuring only 4-6 inches in length, it is one of the most secretive species in NA. They inhabit areas of dense reedy vegetation, making them very hard to see and collect data regarding their status and distribution. In 2008, Dr Watts and the CCB established the Eastern Black Rail Working Group to produce a status assessment and conservation action plan. Extensive studies revealed that the black rail may be the most endangered bird species along the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts of North America, and in 2020 it was listed by the US Fish and Wildlife Service as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. Their decline is primarily due to three types of habitat loss: (1) wetland reclamation for development, beginning in the late 1800s leading to hundreds of thousands of acres of marshes being lost; (2) marsh modification programs starting in the 1930s to reduce the population of mosquitos by digging drainage ditches; and (3) more recently, and the current leading cause of habitat loss, sea level rise.

Black rails are found in five types of habitats: wet grassy fields, freshwater wetlands, impoundments, coastal prairies and, their often-preferred habitat of a narrow band just above high tide in salt marshes. They require a water depth of about one inch, and being a ground nester, are not very tolerant of more or less. Historically, their breeding range reached as far north as the Newbury Marshes in Massachusetts but in just the last few years their northern range has now contracted all the way down to S Carolina. The last record of one in Virginia was that of the call of a male on Craney Island heard by Bill Williams in 2017. Since the 1990s, there's not been enough young rails produced to offset adult mortality. Currently, there is a race to slow the free fall decline of black rails by creating/managing suitable habitat. Because of the inability to control sea level rise squeezing the black rail out of tidal marsh habitats, conservation efforts are currently focused in the vast non-tidal wetlands of South Florida where there remains the largest population of an estimated 200 black rails. Measures that mimic existing successful nesting sites to enhance existing habitats and create new ones that are dependable for supporting a breeding population include providing a diverse topographical surface with variation of water depth and soil moisture; using prescribed fire to control woody growth; working with farmers to manage grazing cattle herds; and adding water to a site if too dry. Currently, Dr Watts and his team are looking for places in Central Florida to test these management practices.

Dr Watts concluded by noting that we've come a long way in the last decade in understanding the distribution and needs of the black rail but have a long way to go in understanding how to implement management on the ground and successfully bring them back from the brink of extinction. It is hoped that if they are successful in Florida, they can use the same methods for reestablishing the black rail

northward to its historic range, although he thought it would probably entail moving birds from Florida to established breeding grounds.

Your WBC dues support the club's annual donation of \$500 to the Center for Conservation Biology and their remarkable conservation efforts.

A video recording of Dr Watt's presentation will be available on Zoom through October 20.

**Field Trips – George Martin, Field Trip Coordinator:** George reported on the following:

**Saturday, Sept 18:** Newport News Park with Jason Strickland as leader. Meet at the parking lot at the rangers station at 8 am. There will be no car-pooling.

**Saturday, October 16:** Matt Anthony will lead us to several sites on the Eastern Shore. Details haven't been set yet, but I expect the itinerary will be similar to what the Club did in October 2019 - overlook, ESVANWR, Kiptopeke. Car-pooling at the usual meeting spot at Colony Square Shopping Center may be in order for this trip but it will be up to the driver to decide on vaccination/masking protocol for passengers. Start time to be decided, but 9 a.m. at ESVANWR visitor center might be appropriate. Further details to be released.

**Sunday, January 16, 2022:** George has reserved the *Nancy Anne* for the Club's annual boat trip. The owners sold the *Bay Princess*. The capacity of the *Nancy Anne* is 40 people; only 2/3 the capacity of the *Bay Princess*. Cost of the trip is \$1400 so the cost per person will be a bit more and determined at the next Board Meeting. Bird Club members will have priority for signing up.

**Bird Walks – Scott Hemler:** Scott Hemler was absent. Cheryl reported on the following:

**Saturday, Sept 25:** New Quarter Park at 8 am with George Martin as leader.

**Saturday, October 30:** New Quarter Park at 8 am with Scott Hemler as leader. Date altered to avoid 5K race the weekend before.

**Programs – Tory Gussman, Vice President:** Tory was absent. Cheryl reported on the following:

**Wednesday, October 20:** Brent Lubbock, Director of Operations and Development at Sylvan Heights Bird Park in Scotland Neck, NC will describe past and present avian conservation projects and share information about the park's Avian Breeding Center.

**Wednesday, November 17:** Bob Schamerhorn will present a program on *Attracting Birds with Water*.

**Announcements:**

- **Purple Martin Project:** Cheryl reminded members that the Purple Martin Committee is hosting a fire pit meeting on Sept 30<sup>th</sup> at 5 pm at Chickahominy River Front Park where they've had the most successful response to installing gourds. 40 Purple Martins were spotted on them near the end of the season. It will be a social gathering with hotdogs and smores to celebrate the progress the committee has made and for them to share information about Purple Martins and the committee's plans for the future. The group continues to monitor the Purple Martin sites at New Quarter Park, York River State Park and VIMS. There are plans to upgrade the purple martin house that was donated at Fords Colony and add a telescoping pole. Cheryl requested that folks email her if planning to attend so appropriate amount of food can be supplied. Historic Rivers Master Naturalists are also invited.
- **Dues:** Jeanette Navia reported that membership dues are due every calendar year starting in January. Members may pay earlier, if they like. She has accomplished most of the work of

adding PayPal to our website as another option for paying dues but needs to test it before making it available for use by the membership.

Cheryl enquired how much we donate annually to the Center for Conservation Biology. Ann Carpenter reported \$500. She added that Bryan Watts always donates his speaker honorarium of \$75 to the CCB which amounted to a total of \$150 this year. Cheryl reminded the attendees of the value of having a portion of our dues going to support CCB research projects.

- **Future Meetings:** Cheryl reported that we are hoping to be able to start holding in-person WBC membership meetings in January 2022. Because the future of resuming meetings at W&M is uncertain, Cheryl has arranged for accommodations at the James City County Recreation Center. She is planning on reserving two rooms from which the center partition can be removed to make it one big one. We would have access to the kitchen and there is a separate entry way from the outside. Of course, everything depends on the state of the Covid pandemic at that time. Cheryl added that the benefit of staying on the W&M campus, if we can, is making our meetings more accessible to the students.
- **Child Development Resources:** Gary Carpenter reported that the CDR is planning on reopening in-person this September. He was told that they currently have plenty of seeds to stock the feeders outside their playroom and will let him know when they need more. Gary was also told that when a child is upset that taking them to watch the birds eating calms them down.
- **Bird Feeders:** Members reported that they are putting their feeders up again since the mysterious disease that was earlier this year killing birds in the mid- Atlantic states with symptoms of crusty eyes and neurological damage appears to have passed. The attendees were reminded of the importance of cleaning our feeders once a week.

Cheryl adjourned the meeting at 8:30 pm

Respectfully submitted,  
Cathy Millar, Secretary Williamsburg Bird Club  
September 17, 2021