

**Williamsburg Bird Club**  
**Wednesday, February 16, 2022**

Hybrid Zoom & in-person meeting at Williamsburg Regional Library Theater; presided by President  
Nancy Barnhart; 6:30 pm

**Attendance:** 31 in-person and approximately 70 via Zoom

**President's Remarks:** President Nancy Barnhart welcomed everyone to the Williamsburg Bird Club's first hybrid meeting. This was the annual joint meeting of our club and the Historic Rivers Chapter of Master Naturalists. Hampton Roads Bird Club, Piedmont Bird Club and the Cape Henry Audubon Society were also invited. Nancy thanked Master Naturalist Rick Brown for his technical assistance. Nancy reminded folks that the library closes at 8 pm and that we are obliged to leave by then. She also announced that due to lack of available time, there would be no business meeting following the presentation.

**Program:** Program's Vice President, Patty Maloney, introduced the evening's speaker, Bill Williams. Bill is not only the founder of our club and three-time past-president, but also the founder of Coastal Virginia Wildlife Observatory. He has conducted bird research studies in Virginia for more than 50 years that have included colonial waterbird surveys for the Nature Conservancy, many Kiptopeke and College Creek Hawk Watches, and the Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas. He has authored many articles, and been editor of the Virginia Society of Ornithology Quarterly Journal, as well as taught many bird study classes. It is no surprise that he was recently recognized by the Center of Conservation Biology as a Conservation Champion! At our meeting, Bill talked about his experience of being part of a team that has conducted weekly surveys of the birds on Craney Island for the last 14 years. Due to the diverse habitat, they have documented 270 species.

In the early 1600's, it was already called Craney Island because of long-legged waders that were mistakenly called cranes that nested/roosted there.

Bill reviewed the island's interesting history which included having once been fortified and was the site of the American victory of the War of 1812's bloody Battle of Craney Island. It was separated from the mainland by a narrow slip of water in the early 1900's and served as a quarantine site for confining folks suffering from smallpox and yellow fever. In 1938, the slip of water was filled in and Craney Island lost its status as an island. What was the island is now a Navy fuel depot. What we now call Craney Island is a 2,500-acre manmade facility run by the Army Corps of Engineers that was completed in 1957 for long term disposal of material dredged from the channels and ports of the Hampton Roads area. The area started becoming a birding destination while it was under construction and has continued since. The first avian research on Craney Island was started by W&M grad student, Bill Akers and his roommate, who, with Ruth Beck's assistance, were studying the Least Tern population in Hampton Roads. That research eventually led to a formalized agreement in 1984 between the Army Corp of Engineers and W&M as a bird protection project of critical habitat for beach nesting birds. Then, in 2012, Ruth Beck along with the Dept of Wildlife Resources established a Long-Term Bird Management Plan which has been the guiding light of the surveys conducted by Bill and the team. Ruth died in 2015 and the surveys have continued in her honor. Since 2008, the team has conducted a total of 505 surveys, usually started at daybreak, entailing 3,248.5 hours and 2,010,094 birds documented! The dedication of the team is obvious considering that they have logged 55,500 miles driving to and from Craney and then 7,575 miles driving on the island and a total of 4,891.5 hours devoted to the surveys and subsequent data entry. The

resulting data is shared in Annual and Quarterly Summary Reports to the Army Corp of Engineers for guidance in their Long-Term Bird Management Plan. Bill described how the island is constantly under maintenance with dikes being reinforced and spillways controlling the water level within the three cells that receive the dredged materials.

The challenge of the surveys includes counting every bird, even if that means a raft of 2,200 Ruddy Ducks. As many as 4,300 Northern Shovelers have been reported in single day. A total of thirty-one waterfowl species have been recorded.

The team's intimate familiarity with the island helps them to find normally hard-to-find birds like breeding Common Nighthawks.

Forty shorebird species have been recorded of which the Black-necked Stilt is a star attraction. Craney Island hosts the highest population in Virginia with as many as 140 documented in one day. 720 American Avocets were counted on 30 September 2021. Another Virginia record-breaker was 244 Red-necked Phalaropes seen in one day.

In 2013, a Snowy Owl arrived in early December and stayed until mid-March 2014.

Eight gull species and nine tern species and Black Skimmer have been recorded. The Royal Terns nest 5 miles away at the site of the Hampton Roads Bridge Tunnel and once fledged, fly to Craney to feed.

Bill's presentation was illustrated with many wonderful photos of the birds, including a number of rarities, that were all taken by the team members. One photo featured a closeup of a Roseate Spoonbill, Mallard, Snowy Egret, Great Egret and a Western and an Eastern Willet clustered together. Bill's helpful identification tips accompanied many photos.

Bill stressed that access to Craney Island is restricted normally to only *escorted* groups of no more than 30 people and that Craney is currently closed to the public due to Covid.

Bill concluded with a list of all the survey participants. He credited the success of the surveys to three particular participants: Ruth Beck, Shirley Devan and Lee Schuster who held the project together.

Unfortunately, there was no time for a question-and-answer period. The presentation via YouTube will be available at the club's website.

Nancy adjourned the meeting at 8 pm

Respectfully submitted,  
Cathy Millar, Secretary,  
Williamsburg Bird Club,  
February 20, 2022