

## Williamsburg Bird Club

November 16, 2022

Conducted via Zoom, invited by Rick Brown and presided by Nancy Barnhart, 7pm

**Attendance:** 39

**President's Remarks:** President Nancy Barnhart welcomed the attendees including invited members of the Historic Rivers Chapter of Master Naturalists via Zoom. She expressed sincere gratitude to Rick Brown who'd stepped in at the last minute to host the meeting via his own Zoom account when glitches had arisen in the absence of our regular club Zoom host, Ann Carpenter, was on vacation.

**Program – Alex Wilke:** Patty Maloney introduced our speaker Alex Wilke who is a coastal scientist at The Nature Conservancy's Volgenau Virginia Coast Reserve (VVCr) on Virginia's Eastern Shore. Alex pursued her wildlife conservation studies at W&M's Center for Conservation Biology and earned her master's degree in biology under advisor, Ruth Beck. She was also one of our club's ornithology research grant recipients.

Alex's presentation, "*Connections Across the Hemispheres*", highlighted the position of Virginia's Eastern Shore as being one of the most important places for shorebirds in the Western Hemisphere.

Headquartered at Nassawadox at the Brownsville Preserve, the Virginia Coast Reserve has 13 full time staff and several seasonal staff to protect 38,000 acres including 14 barrier islands and marsh properties and the mainland Brownsville preserve. The VVCr is part of 130,000 acres of conserved land including federal and state-owned protected land on the Eastern Shore barrier lagoon system making it a coastal wilderness unmatched anywhere else on the East Coast. This area was about to be developed in the late 1960s and early 70s during the commercial development rush on other barrier islands along the Atlantic coast when the Nature Conservancy started buying land, starting around Smith Island. These wild barrier islands are not only great habitat for birds but they also protect the coastal bays that are behind them that support aquaculture and nature-based tourism.

Alex described the VVCr's five functions: (1) land protection including up to 70 miles of barrier island coastline which is at the heart of the Nature Conservancy; (2) migratory bird conservation which Alex leads; (3) marine restoration program to restore marine habitats, particularly in eel grass beds and oyster reefs; (4) coastal resilience program, which works with local communities to plan how they can best prepare and adapt for climate change and sea level rise; and (5) an education and outreach program to keep these communities informed about what VVCr does and accommodate visitor use by posting interpretive kiosks, brochures and posters at access points, such as boat ramps informing how they can enjoy the area with minimal impact to the birdlife, as well as imposing seasonal closing of important nesting sites.

Barrier island breeding birds and migratory shorebirds have been one of VVCr's primary conservation targets since the beginning, just over 50 years ago. One of the highlights of Alex's presentation of personal interest to our club was an old photo of a volunteer group that she fondly referred to as Williams et al Team featuring Bill Williams, Bill Akers, Ruth and Michael Beck and Jerry Via. She credited them with initially surveying these barrier islands for decades and collecting information about the colonial waterbirds that set the stage for everything that VVCr does today.

The Eastern Shore is a critical sanctuary in the middle of the Atlantic Flyway and twice a year hosts millions of shorebirds, waterbirds, seabirds, raptors and passerines. During the breeding season, the area is critical habitat to over 50% of all of Virginia's colonial nesting waterbirds, including 14% of Atlantic Coast Piping

Plovers and 30% of Atlantic/Gulf Coasts American Oystercatchers. As such, the area has been designated an Audubon area of regional importance and Western Shorebird Reserve Network of international importance.

The Migratory Bird Program of VVCR maintains long-term monitoring of certain species to inform their management and export the data to bigger regional conservation initiatives. Management involves working with USDA Wildlife Services to control predators such as foxes and raccoons. Data collected by Williams's Team et al from 1975 to 2003 showed a decline in nesting Gull-billed Terns, Common Terns, Least Terns and Black Skimmers that had corresponded to a sharp rise in distribution of mammalian predators on the islands. Since predator control, there has been a 97% increase in American Oyster Catchers in the last 20 years, with the islands now hosting over 500 pairs of nesting AMOY, but there has been a decrease of productivity since 2016. Alex's graduate work was on AMOY and she is now working with Virginia Tech to determine why chicks are hatching but not surviving. Tracking chicks with radio tags weighing less than 1 gram, they've identified ghost crabs and avian predators like kestrels having been responsible for some losses, which requires future studies. There was a similar increase in Piping Plovers until 2016 when for unknown reasons (not mammalian predators) their numbers have been dropping, requiring further investigation. The program also entails managing visitor disturbance and planning to mitigate the impacts of sea level rise and the potential impacts of offshore energy development to migratory birds. Virginia's Eastern Shore is an important staging area for at least 15,000 migrating Whimbrels. Dominion Energy has plans to build 43km off Virginia's coastline 176 wind turbines 245 meters tall (almost as tall as the Eiffel Tower!) covering an area of 458sq.km. Previous tracking info on Whimbrels does not show the altitude they will be flying through and around this area. Dominion Energy is funding a program that VVCR is working on with W&M's Center for Conservation Biology to fit 30 whimbrels with GPS transmitter that will provide this data critical to evaluating the potential risk to Whimbrels.

The stewardship component of VVCR provides many opportunities for volunteers that they train to help monitor this remote area and interest visitors in protecting birds.

Alex concluded by inviting folks to join them for the Whimbrel Watch in May 2023 and shared these links to further info: [nature.org/vvcr](https://nature.org/vvcr), [exploreourseashore.org](https://exploreourseashore.org), and [birdingeasternshore.org](https://birdingeasternshore.org) that identifies good birding spots. Please visit (YouTube address) for the full presentation.

### **Announcements:**

#### **Field Trips – George Martin Field Trip Coordinator:**

- **Saturday, November 19:** Grandview Nature Preserve led by Nancy Barnhart. Participants will meet at the entrance on State Park Drive at 8:00 am. So far, four folks have asked to car pool. Those who car pool should meet at Colony Square Shopping Center at 7:00 am to depart no later than 7:15. Weather looks good and the walk will be during low tide. Nancy reported that a good variety of winter birds ( the three species of scoters, buffleheads, loons and brants) had already arrived.

#### **Bird Walks – Scott Hemler:**

- **Saturday, November 26:** New Quarter Park. Folks will meet in the parking lot by the office at 8:00am.

**Programs – Patty Maloney, Vice President (Programs):** Patty reported that the Christmas Bird Count will be held in lieu of a program in December.

**Christmas Bird Count – Jim Corliss:** Jim was absent. Nancy reported that the all-day CBC will be held Sunday, December 18<sup>th</sup>. Folks who want to join a team or participate in any capacity should please contact Jim Corliss or Nancy.

**Winter Wildlife Festival:** Nancy reported that she'd sent the membership a link to this festival held from January 28 – February 5th in Virginia Beach. Registration has just opened. She encouraged us to check it out.

**The Flyer – Mary Ellen Hodges, Vice President (Editor):** No newsletter in December. Please think of contributions to the January 2023 newsletter.

**Annual Bird Club Election – Shirley Devan:** Shirley reported that the Nominating Committee this year was Shirley Devan, Patty Maloney, and Barbara Giffin. Their job was easy because everyone on the Board had agreed to serve another year. She read the following proposed slate of the executive board for 2023:

- President - Nancy Barnhart
- Vice-President, Programs - Patty Maloney
- Vice-President, Editor - Mary Ellen Hodges
- Treasurer - Ann Carpenter
- Secretary - Cathy Millar
- Member-at-Large/Asst. Editor - Gary Carpenter
- Member-at-Large - Shirley Devan.

Shirley asked if there were any nominations from the membership this evening's Zoom meeting. There were none. Bill Williams moved that the slate be accepted; Deborah Humphries seconded the motion. Shirley asked for a show of hands on the screen. The motion was passed with no objections.

**The 2<sup>nd</sup> Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas Sponsor-a-Species: – Shirley Devan:** Shirley reported that the data from tens of thousands of checklists of breeding birds submitted by observers in the field from 2016 – 2020 has undergone analysis (new breeders were recorded). This part was mostly funded with the help of the Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources. The VSO is now solely in charge of making this information available in a breeding bird atlas which will be launched on a website in 2025 and is completely responsible for its funding. Accordingly, the VSO is engaged in a big fund raiser called Sponsor-a Species to pay for an editor, web site design, writers, map preparation, further analysis, etc. There are almost 200 species breeding in Virginia and one can adopt one or more as a sponsor with a tax-deductible donation ranging from \$200 for 3 years up to \$1000 for 3 years. Sponsors and their chosen bird will be noted in the VBBA2. Over 55 birds have already been sponsored. Shirley will send out more info via email to the membership. Nancy added that our bird club has sponsored the Red-headed Woodpecker in honor of the two founders of our club: Bill Williams and Ruth Beck.

**Announcement by Cathy Flanagan:** Cathy reported that she is considering preparing a holiday trivia game to send out to the membership. She also requested and received permission to share a link with the membership for a Zoom presentation about local butterflies sponsored by the Native Plant Society.

**New Year's Day Bird & Birder Show – Shirley Devan:** Shirley reported that she is organizing a get-together to celebrate the start of a new year of birding at the fire circle at New Quarter Park on January 1<sup>st</sup> 2023 from 1-3 pm.

**Membership Renewal:** Judy Jones reminded the membership that the last page of the November newsletter had a membership renewal form for 2023. The dues structure remains unchanged. Nancy encouraged members to also consider opportunities for other donations on the form. Renewal is also easily available online.

**Bird Observations:** Deborah Humphries saw a Nashville Warbler and there has been a Common Gallinule hanging around the Greensprings Interpretive Trail for many days.

Nancy Barnhart adjourned the meeting at 8:36 pm.

Respectfully Submitted  
Cathy Millar, Secretary Williamsburg Bird Club  
November 25, 2022