

Williamsburg Bird Club

March 15, 2023

Hybrid meeting: hosted in person at the Williamsburg Regional Library auditorium and via Zoom hosted by Ann Carpenter, 6pm

Attendance: 12 in person and 37 via Zoom

President's Remarks: President Nancy Barnhart from the library auditorium welcomed the attendees present and those on Zoom. She announced that the program would be followed by a brief business session of announcements.

Program: Patty Maloney, Vice President, Programs, introduced the evening's speaker. Chance Hines, a research biologist with the Center for Conservation Biology at W&M, oversees monitoring the northern-most population of Red-cockaded Woodpeckers (RCW) at The Nature Conservancy-owned 3,200-acre Piney Grove Preserve in Sussex, VA. His March presentation, *Red-cockaded Woodpeckers in Virginia*, gave us a behind-the-scenes look at the hard work involved in managing the habitat and monitoring their population.

The Red-cockaded Woodpecker is a small woodpecker similar in size to a Downy with a black and white striped ladder back and a sizeable white cheek. It gets its name from the tiny, nearly invisible red streak seen only in males on both sides at the upper border of the white cheek and is chiefly noticeable only when flashed in agitation. The red marking is reminiscent of rosettes made of ribbon called a cockade that adorned hats in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The RCW evolved in old-growth, open-understory longleaf pine forests that were once extensive throughout our southeast but nearly disappeared due to extensive logging in the 20th century. Piney Grove contains one of the few remaining stands of mature longleaf pine as well as loblolly and shortleaf pines which RCW's favor for nesting. For safety, they choose old pines with very little understory. Historically, that open understory was created by lightning-caused fires but modern forest fire prevention unwittingly added to the loss of that special habitat. So now, a major conservation measure is conducting controlled fires about every 3 years at Piney Grove.

Most woodpecker species choose dead trees for their nest cavities, but RCWs choose living pine trees in which the heartwood has been softened by red heart fungus. Choosing a site that is usually 30-40 feet high (at times 80 ft) and below the first branch, they drill through the pine's live wood to reach the softened diseased wood which is easier to excavate but it can still take up to 2-10 years to create a cavity. When finished, they drill holes beneath the nest entrance to release sticky pine resin that discourages predators like black rat snakes and other cavity-using species like flying squirrels and other birds. Streaks of this resin are a hallmark for identifying an RCW's nest cavity. Because it takes so long to create a nest cavity, another major method of facilitating RCW breeding is biologists cutting an appropriate space in a preferred pine and inserting an artificial nest cavity with the right size nest hole. They even spray paint white stripes beneath to simulate the look of sap flow to attract the RCW's attention!

Another conservation measure is using metal plates to restrict the opening to the nest box to the preferred 2 -3 inches and prevent them from being widened by squirrels or other species of woodpeckers.

An unusual behavioral feature of the Red-cockaded Woodpecker is that it is a cooperative breeder: it lives in small family groups of one breeding pair (the dominant male and female) and several helpers. The helpers (which may include related and nonrelated birds) assist in incubation and feeding even after fledglings leave the nest. RCWs like to excavate several cavities in pine trees spaced in clusters in their

territory and use them year-round for roosting as well as breeding. Except for the breeding season, each RCW roosts alone in separate cavities. The breeding male roosts in the best cavity, usually the one he's most recently created and that has the heaviest sap flow. During breeding season, he turns the cavity over to the female to lay eggs. When the youngsters have fledged at 24-27 days old, he reclaims the cavity for roosting. The biologists band the birds at age 5 -10 days old.

RCWs are the only federally endangered woodpecker in NA. By 2002, there were only 2 breeding pairs at Piney Grove Preserve in all of Virginia. RCWs from other states were translocated to Piney Gove for genetic diversity. There are currently 20 potential breeding pairs.

An effort to reestablish RCWs in the Great Dismal Swamp in an area of naturally open habitat with shortleaf and pond pines was begun in 2015. Artificial nest cavities were installed and RCWs translocated from Piney Grove and Carolina Sandhills NWR. Over the years, 50 birds have been translocated to the Great Dismal Swamp and there are currently 10-15 RCWs.

You really need to watch the video to see the stealth maneuvers required to translocate RCWs; monitor the nest cavities with a 'peeper cam'; and retrieve the babies for banding.... all at 30-80 ft up on a skinny ladder! Acrophobics need not apply!

Creating a life line for RCWs has been a collaborative effort of state, nonprofit, university and federal partners.

The biologists at Piney Grove are also working with the state to protect additional habitat at Big Woods State Forest and Big Woods Wildlife Management Area that borders Piney Grove and creates a combined conservation area giving these woodpeckers more than 7,500 acres to roam. Their future is looking brighter.

Announcements:

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

- **Saturday, March 18:** Field trip to Machicomoco State Park in Gloucester Co. with Nancy Barnhart as leader. We will meet at the parking lot just inside the park's pay station at 8 a.m., so bring your state park pass if you have one! If you'd like to car pool, we will meet at the Colony Square Shopping Center at 7:15 a.m.
- **Saturday, April 15:** We'll visit Newport News Park with Jason Strickland as leader. More info to come.

Bird Walks:

- **Saturday April 25:** Nancy reported that due to a 5K race being held at NQP, our monthly bird walk will instead be at Warhill Sports Complex.

Spring Bird Count: Nancy reminded everyone that our annual Spring Bird Count will be held on May 7th. She encouraged everyone to participate and to contact Jim Corliss if interested.

Summer VSO Field Trip: Nancy reported that the Summer VSO Field Trip to Gloucester will be held June 2-4 (Friday, Saturday, and Sunday) and will include Machicomoco State Park and Beaver Dam Park. The trip is free but membership is essential and Nancy encouraged folks to consider joining the VSO. The VSO also plans to be leading a trip to Piney Grove.

Next Membership Meeting: Nancy announced that our next meeting, Wednesday, April 19th, will be a hybrid meeting and the featured program will be reports from the W&M students who received ornithology research grants from us.

The Flyer: Nancy announced that the deadline for submissions to Mary Ellen Hodges for our April newsletter will be March 27th.

Hawk Watch: Nancy reported that the 1,000th bird was counted today, March 15th. It was neck and neck between an Osprey and a Turkey Vulture, when the TV pulled ahead. This is the earliest ever by about 6 days that the 1,000 mark has been reached. As of the 15th, the count stands at 1009.

Video: Gary and Ann Carpenter shared a beautiful clip of a Purple-crowned Fairy Hummingbird taking a dip in a pool that was taken on their birding trip to Belize.

DWR Falcon Cam: Shirley Devan reported that the DWR has their live Peregrine Falcon Nest Cam up now. Nancy reenforced what a delight it is to watch.

Nancy Barnhart adjourned the meeting at 7:13 pm.

Respectfully Submitted,
Cathy Millar, Secretary Williamsburg Bird Club,
March 18, 2023