

Williamsburg Bird Club

September 20, 2023

Hybrid meeting conducted in person at Quarterpath Rec Center, Room 2, 202 Quarterpath Road, Williamsburg, and via Zoom hosted by Ann Carpenter, at 6 pm

Attendance: 19 in person, 30 via Zoom

President's Remarks: President Nancy Barnhart welcomed the assembly and expressed appreciation for everyone's patience in the change of venue at the last minute. She announced that there will be a brief presentation of upcoming events after the program.

Program: Patty Maloney, Vice President, Programs, introduced the evening's speaker, James Abbott from Yorktown, Virginia. He is a Senior Environmental Educator and Master Captain for the James River Association (JRA). He attended the University of North Carolina in Wilmington where he earned a BS in Biology and Environmental Science becoming a researcher and conservation biologist. He went on to protect and study the habitats of southeastern river systems through the research of birds. This culminated in graduate school at UNC Wilmington studying the food webs of the upper Bladen River in Belize. All these research projects taught him that science doesn't elicit change without dedicated outreach and education. His MS in Environmental Science concentrated on education. He joined the JRA team in Williamsburg in 2017 and works to conserve America's Founding River by fostering and understanding and caring for the natural world in students across the Lower James Watershed. James is also the Field Trip Coordinator for the Hampton Roads Bird Club, Guided Walk Leader for the Elizabeth River Project at Paradise Creek Nature Park, and the primary guide for the Nature Bus in Virginia Beach.

As senior environmental educator of the James River Association, James's program, *Birding the James River, and Its Watershed*, reflected a in-depth understanding of the James River. Founded in 1976, the JRA is the oldest and largest river conservation group in Virginia, and the only organization solely dedicated to protecting and restoring America's Founding River. As the river's guardian, its two major goals are fully implementing the cleanup plans for the James River under the Chesapeake Bay Cleanup effort and educating communities to realize the benefits of a healthy James River and to support and help protect it.

We learned that the James is 340 miles long and is fed by 25,000 miles of tributaries, which makes it one of the longest rivers in America that begins and ends in the same state. The James River watershed encompasses approximately 10,000 square miles, which makes up almost 25% of the state and provides a wide variety of habitat for birds.

492 species of birds have been recorded in Virginia and 66% of those were recorded in our watershed. 83% can be found in the Coastal Plain and 29% are completely or mostly confined to water or water associated habitats.

In the winter, he described the tidal fresh water portion of the James, like at Dutch Gap, as being one of the most important water fowl over-wintering areas on the East Coast. Submerged aquatic vegetation feeds millions of ducks, geese and swans all winter long. Other places recommended for winter birdwatching were Hog Island, the loop drive on Jamestown Island (esp. stop 6 where you can walk to Black Point, from which there is a panoramic view of the river), and Highland County. He noted that one can find similar Important Bird Areas (IBA) listed on the Audubon web site.

In the spring, there is a massive northward push of neotropical migrants: songbirds, raptors, and shorebirds across the James, especially at pinch points in the river, like the one created by Hog Island. He suggested looking up into mature hardwood trees that catch the early morning sun that activates insects for hungry migrants. A favorite spot of his is a group of tulip poplars next to the Glass House on

Jamestown Island where he's seen Scarlet Tanagers and Cape May Warblers. He also recommended visiting in April the colony of Yellow-crowned Night Herons who nest in the live oaks in Fort Monroe. He highly recommended birding along Warbler Road which traverses 13 miles of a series of connected country roads. It starts at Sunset Overlook on the Blue Ridge Parkway and descends a total of 2,700 feet to Warbler Road's end at the James River. The variation of habitat and elevation provides great birding opportunities.

In the summer, the James provides critical food supply for nesting families. Our state's largest seabird nesting colony of around 15,000 is at the mouth of the James River at Fort Wool and anchored barges. This is a temporary solution for when the seabirds were displaced in 2019 from South Island due to work on a new tunnel for the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel. The DWR is working with the US Army Corps of Engineers and other agencies to create a new permanent 10-acre island nearby from dredged material. Many of the Royal Terns that we see on the pilings at the Scotland Ferry are foraging adults from Fort Wool. James also noted that the Central Piedmont region in the upper watershed around Charlottesville has been recently designated as an important IBA. Nesting Common Mergansers are being observed, and on the farmlands, isolated pockets of imperiled grassland species like Bobolinks, Dickcissel, and Grasshopper Sparrows are breeding.

In autumn, James recommended Rockfish Gap Hawkwatch in Afton on the Blue Ridge Parkway. He noted that fall migration for shorebirds surprisingly begins in August while it is still hot here. Mainland Farm, which is visible from Greensprings Trail, was reported as often being a good place to spot Snipe between the rows of corn in damp areas. Craney Island, Portsmouth is one of the premier resting spots for migratory birds but access is restricted. However, there is often a spillover to nearby Hoffer Creek Wildlife Preserve where one can often see the lovely Eurasian Wigeon amongst our native Wigeons.

When James was discussing the future of birds in the James River Watershed, he noted that Virginia is an interesting state where 14% of Virginia's bird species reach their northern or southern range limit. Since 1950, change in land use and climate change has created a southward move of species resulting in colonization in Virginia of such species as Painted Buntings, Trumpeter Swans, and Anhinga. The James River, itself, has presented a big ecological barrier to the southward move of native flora.

He concluded by describing the projects the JRA leads. One of them is the James River Leadership Academy where high school students learn about the river by paddling and camping on it and getting involved in improving suitable habitat like building and installing kestrel nest boxes at Westover Plantation.

To learn more about where to see unusual species like Ravens, Alder Flycatchers, Red Crossbills and Golden-winged Warblers, click on the following YouTube link: https://youtu.be/W2y_Wihnbo

Announcements:

Bird Walks:

- **Saturday, September 23rd:** Scott Hemler will lead the monthly walk at New Quarter Park, despite forecast of rain and wind. Those interested should gather in the parking lot at 8am. Nancy reported that some of our club's members will be participating in the CVWO 2023 Birdathon on the same day.

- **Saturday, October 28th:** Nancy Barnhart will lead the monthly walk at New Quarter Park. The Cape Henry Audubon Bird Club will be joining us as guests. Folks to meet at 8am in the parking lot.

Next Membership Meeting:

- **Wednesday, October 18th:** Nancy announced that the next meeting will be held at 6 pm at the Williamsburg Regional Library and will also be shared via Zoom. The featured program will be *"Close to Home — 10 Places for Birding and Photography."* by awarding winning photographer and birder, Barbara Houston.

Next Field Trip:

- **Saturday, October 21st:** Our annual trip to the Eastern Shore will be led by Deborah Humphries and will include stops at Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge and Kiptopeke State Park for both the Hawkwatch site where there will be a presentation and a trail. We'll gather at the north side of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel overlook for our first stop around 8:30 a.m. Lunch at the Cape Charles Brewing Company should be the final stop. Those interested in carpooling should let George Martin know and meet at the Colony Square Shopping Center shortly after 7:00 a.m. for departure at 7:15 a.m.

The Flyer: The deadline for submissions to Mary Ellen Hodges for our October newsletter will be Sept 26th.

New Addition to Bird Species in Virginia: Nancy reported that 2 Flamingos blown in by hurricane Idalia were spotted at Plum Tree Island verified by a photo. There is also a report of another Flamingo at Chincoteague waiting to be validated.

CVWO Kiptopeke's One Millionth Hawk: Nancy reported that on Saturday, September 16, the one-millionth raptor, a distant osprey, was recorded at the hawkwatch platform just before 4 pm. The contest to guess the correct day of this event was won by 2 folks. CVWO will be writing an article about the event, winners, and prizes.

Nancy Barnhart adjourned the meeting at 7:25 pm.

Respectfully Submitted,
Cathy Millar, Secretary Williamsburg Bird Club,
September 24, 2023