

Williamsburg Bird Club

January 21, 2026

Zoom meeting only hosted by Ann Carpenter; Presided by President Nancy Barnhart

Attendance: 55

President's Remarks: President Nancy Barnhart welcomed everyone to our annual combined meeting of our bird club and the Historic Rivers Chapter of Virginia Master Naturalists. She appreciated everyone's understanding of conducting an only Zoom meeting due to the high incidence of influenza in our area. She announced there would be a period of brief announcements by both clubs after the presentation. Alas, no refreshments and raffle.

Program: Rexanne Bruno, VP, Programs introduced the speaker, Bobby Clontz. He works with the Nature Conservancy on restoring habitat for Virginia's last remaining Red-cockaded Woodpeckers (RCW) and currently leads the fire program focused on fire-adapted ecosystems for Virginia's chapter of the Nature Conservancy. He has an undergraduate in environmental science and graduate degree in ecology and has focused on the mid Atlantic coastal plain. Bobby presented to us "*Restoration and Management of Red-cockaded Woodpeckers*".

Sporting a large white cheek patch, the RCW resembles, in size, a Hairy Woodpecker, and is mostly limited to open pine savannahs maintained by fire. The red cockade on the woodpecker is a tiny, rarely visible streak of red feathers located behind the eye on only the male's cheek. Historically, they were distributed from eastern Texas to as far north as N.J., but by the late 1990s they were found in Virginia only at Piney Grove Preserve, owned and maintained by the Nature Conservancy. In 2002, there were only 2 breeding birds. Bobby went on to describe how this woodpecker and the history of the decline of the longleaf pine are interwoven, as these RCWs are exclusively dependent on mature, living longleaf pines.

He emphasized that fire is the single most important influence that shaped the community of plants and animals in southeastern US. Lightning-caused fires were an evolutionary force long before Native Americans arrived. He gave Florida as an example as its hot humid climate and surrounding water, make it the lightning rod of the US with intense, year-round, high-density strikes. Regular natural occurring burns ensured the availability of open savannahs for RCWs.

The arrival of Europeans and esp. the Industrial Revolution started the decline of the longleaf pine and woodpecker. By 1840, even before the development of railroads, and the many small private ones, making any forest accessible for exploitation, there was no longer enough longleaf pine in Virginia for commercial use. Introduced pigs, which relished sweet young longleaf pines, took a toll on the pines as they roamed free until there were fencing laws. These trees were theirs for the taking, as the pines remain in a low "grass stage" for many years while developing a deep, thick taproot allowing them to store energy underground to survive fire and drought -- but not pigs! Even modern forest management with its preference for loblolly pines, and with herbicides replacing fires to control undergrowth, has contributed to further decline of longleaf pines. The advent of the internal combustion engine allowed further suppression of natural fires. Throughout the 20th c., military bombing ranges were the best strongholds of RCWs. The forests were left alone for fear of unexploded ordnance. And there were frequent fires from the munitions. Watch the video for further interesting details about how we've impacted longleaf pines over the centuries.

Bobby continued by describing who, when, and how research and restoring longleaf pine forests and the Red-cockaded Woodpecker started and continues. The passing of the Endangered Species Act in 1978 made money available for surveys which started immediately and involved our Drs. Mitchell Byrd, Ruth Beck, Bryan Watts and W&M's Center for Conservation. Restoration done correctly is a complicated

process of getting sunlight to the mineral soil (a type of soil composed predominantly of inorganic mineral particles). He reported many of the unique flora and fauna that return when restoration is successful.

The first phase of RCW restoration began at Piney Grove in 1999 – 2006 and included banding and monitoring; addressing the small isolated genetic pool of existing RCWs by bringing RCWs from other locations; installing artificial nest cavities; and introducing controlled fires. Currently, in phase 3, they have a healthy robust population of RCWs and have translocated some to the Great Dismal Swamp which had lost its population years ago. Also, they are working hard at maintaining and creating more open savannah with controlled burns every 2-4 years. A family group of RCWs require an average of 150 – 250 acres that include mature longleaf pines for them to make their nest cavity in. A large contiguous tract of over 2,000 acres that would support 10 family groups is necessary for genetic diversity. Overall, RCWs are making a good recovery. Sea level rise does threaten all current RCW sites here and in NC in the future. The presentation was concluded with a video of baby RCWs being banded along with more information about these unique woodpeckers.

Announcements

Historic Rivers Chapter: President Janet Harper expressed her club's appreciation for the invitation to a great presentation. She reminded HRC members of reenrollment and club dues. She also prompted them to read the annual report that had been emailed and to fill out Dean Schostak's survey about any changes or projects that they'd like to see.

WBC Bird Walks – Scott Hemler: Scott reported that the upcoming monthly walk at NQP was being cancelled due to forecast of severe weather. He looked forward to seeing folks on the February NQP.

WBC Field Trips – George Martin: The next field trip will be:

Saturday, February 21: Yorktown Colonial Parkway with Rexanne Bruno as leader.

The Flyer – Nancy, reporting for Mary Ellen, announced that the deadline for the February issue is January 27.

Programs – Rexanne Bruno: Rexanne reported the following:

February 18: Sergio Harding will talk about the 2nd VBBA being published on-line and compare results between the 1st and 2nd Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas.

March 18: Jeff Wright will discuss Climate Change and Citizen Science.

Bird Counts – Shirley Devan: Shirley announced that the Spring Bird Count will be held on April 26 and the Christmas Bird Count on December 20.

She reported that there were 128 participants in the December 2025 CBC and that 113 species were recorded. Birds of note were a Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Western Tanager, Cackling Goose, Common Goldeneye, and 96 Bald Eagles. There were also high counts of Chipping Sparrows – 383, Barred Owls – 11; Double-crested Cormorants – 2,842; Bonaparte Gulls – 507; Tree Swallows-232; and Baltimore Orioles -23.

Nancy Barnhart adjourned the meeting at 8:15 pm.

Respectfully submitted,
Cathy Millar, WBC Secretary, January 27, 2026

