

## Williamsburg Bird Club

April 15, 2026

Hybrid Meeting conducted in person at Quarterpath Rec Center 2202 Quarterpath RD , Williamsburg , and via Zoom hosted by Ann Carpenter at 6:30 pm

**Attendance:** 34 were present in person? 17 via Zoom

**President's Remarks:** Nancy Barnhart welcomed everyone. She described the research reports from the recipients of the WBC Bill Sheehan/Ruth Beck Ornithology Research Grants as her favorite club meeting of the year because these young people are the future of ornithology. She thanked Dan Cristol for bringing them to the meeting to share their reports with us.

She announced that there would be some brief announcements after the presentation, as well as refreshments and a free raffle.

**Presentation:** Rexanne Bruno, VP Programs, introduced the first of the two 2025 grant recipients.

Jay Riney is a second-year master's student, whose undergraduate studies in natural resource management and wildlife biology was at Texas Tech. Her main interest is avian responses to rapid expansion of renewable energy development and human modified landscape. She described her research in: "*Understanding Avian Use of a Utility-scale Solar Site in Southeast Virginia, USA*". Located near Smithfield, the bird life of 29 acres of a two-year-old 1,341-acre solar facility that saw frequent mowing and big heavy maintenance equipment was compared with a quiet reference site of 293 acres which had been farm fields and is awaiting development as a solar farm. Jay and her team monitored on foot, and via motion-activated cameras, and sound-recorders activated for 2 hours at midnight, dawn, and dusk.

Among those seen or heard at the solar site was one or more Turkey vultures, Bald Eagles, Field sparrows, Juncos, Mourning Doves, Chuck-wills-widows, Eastern Bluebirds, Summer Tanagers, Orange-crowned Warblers, and American Widgeons (retention ponds). They were surprised to find Mourning Doves, Eastern Towhees, and Wild Turkeys nesting under the panels. Starlings nested in cavities at the end of the panels. They also saw a black bear, bobcat, and fox. Crows appeared to appreciate having the solar panels to put bear excrement on to pick out bugs to eat.

Among those seen or heard at the development site were one or more Upland Sandpipers, Tree Swallows, Kestrels, Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Hooded Warblers, and Gray Catbirds.

Preliminary findings showed both sites supported many species. There were more species on the solar site in the fall, and more species in the reference site in the spring. No dominant species were found, and the panels provided an ecological niche that some birds were using. There were no collisions with the solar panels. To date, in summary, Jay's work has pointed to the adaptability of many birds in disturbed habitats.

Our second presentation, "*An Investigation into Barred Owl Habitat Use in Urban Environments*" was by Justin Biggerstaff, a second-year master's student, whose undergraduate degree is in animal ecology from Iowa State University. He is interested in how birds adapt to rapidly changing environments. He reported that there's been a steady increase in Barred Owls occupying urban environments and that they are comfortable around people. The hunting range of these generalist raptors is increasingly fragmented by increased road use.

Justin's research goals were to investigate how road-specific components influence Barred Owl habitat use; and determining if seasonal effects in habitat use exist between breeding/non-breeding owls. Justin used GPS transmitters, costing \$1400 each, which gave regular locations every four hours. Justin and his team captured 15 Barred Owls (5 males and 10 females). He and his team tracked their locations day and night, while conducting occupancy surveys throughout the upper and middle Virginia Peninsula. It was

previously thought that Barred Owls were primarily a mature forest species, but their adaptability allows them to thrive in suburban settings with mature trees. Because suburbs offer high-density food sources (like bird feeders attracting small mammals), suburban barred owls save energy by not needing to travel as far as forest-dwelling owls, resulting in smaller, more concentrated territories. The ranges of the owls in his study averaged from 296 acres to 74 acres.

Their data suggested that owls do distinguish between types of roads: interstates, secondary roads (arterial), and neighborhood roads. During the daytime, the owls prefer residential over arterial roads, whereas, at night, the preference, for no known reason, flips. Justin is planning to trap more owls to collect/refine his data. He also needs more data for finding if there are seasonal effects in habitat use between breeding/non-breeding owls.

We also learned that Barred Owls are unique in that their age can be estimated by examining the feather patterns under UV light, which will indicate an average of how many times the owl has molted.

The many expenses of their research was obvious, and both students expressed gratitude for the funding they'd received from our club.

### **Announcements:**

**New Members:** Nancy welcomed new members who raised their hand.

**Field Trips – George:** George reported the following:

**Saturday, April 18:** Newport News with Jason Strickland leading. Meet at 8 am at the park ranger station.

**Saturday, May 16:** Chippokes State Park with Eli Kenyon leading. Meet to take the 7:20 ferry to arrive at Chippokes at 8am.

**Bird Walks – Scott Hemler:** Scott had Nancy announce that the next New Quarter Park bird walk will be Saturday, May 25 with Scott leading.

**Newsletter, The Flyer – Mary Ellen Hodges, Editor:** Mary Ellen had Nancy announce that the deadline for the May newsletter is April 26th.

**2026 Williamsburg Spring Bird Count:** Shirley reported that the bird count is April 26<sup>th</sup> and that she needs a sector leader for Warhill area as well as volunteers.

**Mitchell Byrd:** Nancy reported that she'd shared his death, at age 97, with the membership. He was a giant in the world of ornithology and had a great impact on his W&M students. To honor him, Nancy read from the letter about Dr. Byrd that the W&M provost had sent to the W&M community. Fond reminiscing followed.

**Programs – Rexanne Bruno:** Rexanne reported on the following:

**May 20:** Larry Meade, '*Birding Four Corners of Lower 48*' via Zoom

**November Meeting:** Rexanne announced that she will be trying something different that she is calling, *Member Photography Showcase*. She is inviting members to submit to her photos along with brief comments that she will put on power point for the November meeting.

**Interesting Sightings:** Nancy reported that 5 of the 8 prothonotary bird boxes at Greensprings has chickadees nesting in them. Dan Cristol reported a Raven at the W&M Law School. Pileated

Woodpeckers, Louisiana Waterthrushes, and a Northern Parula were among other birds reported by others.

**Summary of Bird Records:** Nancy reported that she keeps a constantly updated listing of birds sighted in our area. It is found at our WBC website by tapping on Local Birds.

**End of Meeting:** A free raffle was held and refreshments enjoyed.

Nancy Barnhart adjourned the meeting at 7:40 pm

Respectfully submitted,  
Cathy Millar, Secretary Williamsburg Bird Club  
April 25, 2026