

Williamsburg Bird Club

September 16, 2026

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

Attendance: 28 in person; 13 via Zoom.

President's Remarks: Nancy Barnhart welcomed everyone. She announced that there would be brief announcements after the presentation, as well as refreshments and a free raffle.

Presentation: Nancy introduced the speaker as our program manager, Rexanne Bruno, is birding in Australia. Our presentation was Colonial Waterbird Conservation in the Hampton Roads, *Reflections on birds, bridges, politics, journalism and environmental activism*, given by Sarah Karpanty, PhD in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology. She is a professor in the Dept of Fish and Wildlife Conservation at VA Tech, and has conducted research on avian ecology and endangered species management. For the last 22 years, she has studied the migratory shorebirds and seabirds of coastal Virginia.

Sarah began giving us a recap of Virginia's biggest ever seabird conservation effort in the relocation of the state's largest seabird colony on South Island. South Island was constructed in 1957 from dredged material to create a southern landing spot for the HRBT tunnel. The resulting 10 acre sandy terrain without predators (VDOT controlled rats) was perfect for nesting; and the convergence of three rivers provided food-rich waters. Since the 1980s, it became alive with approximately 25,000 seabirds. The percentage of those nesting on South Island from April to August compared to the rest of VA were as follows: Laughing Gulls 24%, Black Skimmers 23%, Gull-billed Terns 7%, Royal Terns 84%, Common Terns 46%, and Sandwich Terns 98%. Seabirds were leaving traditional nesting sites on barrier islands which were shrinking from sea level rise. Over-harvesting of forage fish, like menhaden, may also be a contributing factor. Long-term club members present appreciated Sarah crediting the late Ruth Beck and a founder of our club for her tireless study of the colony and even sweetening-up the VDOT staff with her cookies. VDOT later was very willing and actively coordinated with wildlife agencies and scientists to fund and execute an unprecedented relocation plan.

In 2017, VDOT commissioned Sarah and colleagues to analyze the colony and propose alternative nesting sites because they were repaving South Island to support the 2020 HRBT Expansion Project. None of the South Island species are listed as federally endangered or threatened, but our seabird population has been plummeting since the early 1990's and the

gull-billed tern is considered threatened at the state level. Plus, their status as migratory birds is protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 (MBTA). However, because the Trump administration has weakened the law, stating there is no penalty for the unintentional killing of birds or nest destruction, federal funding designated for relocation was eliminated and the project stalled. A barrage of phone calls and letters from concerned citizens, and noteworthy journalism pleading the case, led, in 2020, to Governor Northam instigating a state level MBTA and putting VDWR in charge of the temporary relocation of the colony and planning a permanent site. Against all odds, with Covid shutdown and the seabirds already starting their return from Central and South America, the parade ground of the nearby long-abandoned Fort Wool on Rip Raps Island was upgraded and sand-covered barges added providing 3.5 acres of nesting grounds just in time. Trained border collies safely deterred birds trying to return to South Island. Despite many challenges: a hail storm killing many chicks in 2023; birds dying on the barges from extreme heat waves (shading has been provided); American minks killing a colony in one night, and aggressive Brown Pelicans challenging them for nesting sites; the number of successful fledglings is comparable to those on South Island. Sarah and her team have kept count and banded many. Royal and Sandwich Tern fledglings are easily herded into a wire enclosure for banding, and resighting these banded birds revealed they stay close to the colony after leaving. This guided folks toward planning the permanent site to be a 9.7-acre horseshoe-shaped artificial island along the Hampton Bar in the bay, about a mile south of downtown Hampton. A five acre portion will be elevated to withstand projected 50 years of sea level rise. The curved section facing the bay will be armored for protection. The federal government, via Virginia's Senators Kaine and Warner, securing initial funds through the Army Corps' Beneficial Use of Dredged Materials, is covering 65% of the total. Virginia is covering the remaining 35% with funding designated in the state budget.

Sarah urged us to help them by reporting banded seabirds to USGS Bird Banding Lab or the Virginia Tech reporting email, bandedbirds@vt.edu.

Announcements:

Virginia Conservation Network: Nancy Barnhart was pleased to announce that our application has been approved. VCN is a statewide coalition of over 170 environmental organizations working together to protect Virginia's natural resources, advance climate action, and promote environmental justice. It's primary goal is to organize these diverse groups so they can advocate with "one coordinated voice", particularly within Virginia's General Assembly. They will help keep us informed of relevant legislative issues.

Field Trips: Speaking for George, Nancy reminded us of the details of the upcoming field trip to the Eastern Shore, Sept. 19th. Deborah Humphries will be our leader. Carpooling has been set

up at Colony Square Shopping Center with departure at 6:30 am; and meet-up at the Eastern Shore Refuge Visitor Center at 8 am.

Bird Walks – Scott Hemler: Scott reported the monthly bird walk at New Quarter Park will be held Sept. 26th at 8 am.

The Flyer Nancy Barnhart announced for the editor, Mary Ellen Hodges, that content for the October issue should be submitted by Sept 26.

Bird Count – Shirley Devan: Shirley reported that the upcoming Christmas Bird Count will be our 50th! She is attending an Audubon Zoom meeting for information about it. Ours will be held December 20th.

Regarding a separate issue, Shirley described the duties of the editor of our newsletter, The Flyer, as our current editor would like to retire. She noted that there is software available that makes assembling the yearly 9 issues easier. She requested that those interested should contact her.

Programs: Nancy reported for Rexanne Bruno that the Oct 21st meeting will be via Zoom. Laura Greenleaf will present 'Light Pollution and the Night Sky'. Nancy asked if there were enough members who would like to gather at New Quarter to watch the Zoom broadcast together. A number of hands were raised. Nancy will look into it further. The last meeting of 2026 will feature a Members Photography Showcase arranged by Rexanne.

Gulls Gone Wild: Nancy reported on the fund raiser for CVWO. This year the money will go to Conservation Research Grant in honor of the recent late Brian Taber.

Miscellaneous: Nancy reported that she'd received in the mail a well-worn 20 Birdy Years Williamsburg Bird Club cap that a man had found in a Pennsylvania State Park! She enquired if anyone recognized it. She'll be sending the gentleman one of our caps and some patches.

Nancy adjourned the meeting at 8pm

Respectfully submitted,
Cathy Millar, Secretary Williamsburg Bird Club,
September, 20. 2026

