



The Naturalist

The monthly newsletter of the Historic Rivers Chapter

Virginia Master Naturalist Program

www.vmn-historicrivers.org

A Monthly Newsletter

Volume 2 No. 1 January 2008

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President's Message

Greetings to All! A Happy New Year to everyone.

As the New Year begins I always count my blessings to have such a wonderful family, and good friends, as this world is a delicate one in many ways. I also applied this thought process to Master Naturalist as we finish our first full year in existence, and start our second year of discovery. There is a lot going on. This month the board members are working on getting the service projects planned out, the advanced trainings scheduled in advance as much as possible, getting the web site to reflect all the scheduling, getting all the work we did in the first year into an order that will go forward and help the organization grow stronger.

I hope you will all be a part of this growing process. In February there will be calls for volunteers, chairpersons, and helpers. Be thinking this month how you want to contribute.

My best to you all as we go forward. Cheers.

Kari Abbott, Member and President

Historic Rivers Chapter, Virginia Master Naturalist

Congratulations to Cohort II!!



December 12, 2007: Cohort II graduated from their 40-hour basic training class at the Annual Meeting. The following graduates received certificates (left to right): Susan Engle-Hill, Jordan Westenhaver, Albert James Booth, Lawrence Robertshaw, Jerry Moum, Kathi Mestayer, Joanne Medina, Laura Houghland, Bruce Hill, Scott Dean, Michael Powell. Not pictured: Christie Bartels and Cherie Aukland. Stephen Living, Watchable Wildlife Biologist for the VA Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, (far right in the photo) was the guest speaker.

CHAPTER OFFICERS 2008

*Kari Abbott, President**Susan Powell, Vice President & Programs
Chair**Linda Cole, Secretary**Judy Hansen, Treasurer**Shirley Devan, Newsletter Editor**Jerry Moum, Historian**Jordan Westenhaver, Host**Patty Riddick, Membership**Cherie Aukland, Volunteer Service
Projects**Susan Powell, Training**Clyde Marsteller, Advanced Training**Alice & Seig Kopinitz, Outreach
Committee**Seig Kopinitz, Webmaster**Bruce Hill, Member-at-Large*

COMMITTEES

Volunteer Service Projects*Cherie Aukland, Chair,**Laurie Houghland**Jim Booth***Advanced Training***Clyde Marsteller, Chair**Joanne Medina**Susie Engle-Hill***Training Committee***Susan Powell, Chair**Bruce Hill**Angela Scott**Shirley Devan*

NOTES FROM THE BOARD

The board wishes to remind all members that the meetings of the Board of Directors are open to all members. The upcoming dates are: January 21, February 18, March 17, April 21, and May 19. Location is usually at the Williamsburg Regional Library on Scotland Street in Williamsburg but the location is subject to change so contact a Board member to confirm location.

Patty Riddick reminds all to turn in their hours for December. pattyriddick@cox.net

Upcoming VIMS Events

January 15, 2008 -- Discovery Lab Series

The Chesapeake Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve at VIMS will resume its Discovery Lab series in January 2008 with a look at sharks. The free labs take place on the third Tuesday of each month in the Catlett-Burruss Research and Teaching lab on the VIMS campus in Gloucester Point. Each Discovery Lab focuses on a specific topic and includes research, displays, and hands-on activities for kids and adults of all ages. No registration required. For more information, visit www.vims.edu/cbnerr or call Sarah McGuire at 804-684-7878. Future topics include invasive species (Feb 19th), horseshoe crabs (March 18th), and cownose rays (April 15th).

January 31, 2008 -- VIMS After Hours

[VIMS After Hours lecture series is approved for Advanced Training hours.]

The After Hours Lecture Series will resume on January 31, 2008 following the winter holidays. All lectures are held in McHugh Auditorium in Watermen's Hall on the VIMS campus in Gloucester Point. For more information, visit, www.vims.edu/afterhours/index.html or call Sarah McGuire at 804-684-7878.

Monthly Programs Count as Advanced Training

Monthly chapter meetings are open to ALL -- cohort I and cohort II.

Members earn Advanced Training Hours by attending monthly program meetings. Mark your calendars:

January 9, 2008 -- Birds and Citizen Science

Wednesday, January 9, 2008, 6 p.m. - 9 p.m. At the Human Services Building on Olde Towne Road. Ruth Beck, ornithologist and recently retired professor of biology at William and Mary, will speak to our group about ornithology citizen science projects in 2008. Ruth will talk about projects she is involved with including nesting terns at Craney Island, the Hampton Roads Bridge-Tunnel, and Grand View Beach. She will talk about how our Chapter can help her with her citizen science research.

February 9, 2008 -- SPIDERS!!

Saturday, February 9, 2008, 1 - 4 p.m. at Williamsburg/James City County Regional Library on Croaker Road. Barbara Abraham is associate professor of biological science at Hampton University and she is Hampton Roads' only arachnologist. She's also the only female arachnologist in Virginia, said Brent Opell, president-elect of the American Arachnological Society. Her expertise is called on for a variety of duties, from providing spider-expert answers for news media and museums to consulting on lawsuits and textbooks.

She's documenting the species of spiders in the Great Dismal Swamp, which range from the orb weavers that make intricate webs to wolf spiders. She's also been tapped to help attorneys in a case in which someone was reportedly bitten by a brown recluse spider. Plus, she's working with the state Department of Game and Inland Fisheries to document and locate habitats for invertebrates in Virginia. (from Daily Press: 'Spider Lady' spins excellent reputation. published on 8/8/2001)

March 15, 2008 -- Winter Botany

Saturday, March 15, 2008, 9 a.m. - 12 noon. Winter Botany will be our focus when Charlie Dubay, science teacher at Jamestown High School, opens his classroom to us to discuss identification of trees in winter. Then we will walk the Greensprings Trail and use our skills to identify trees and other plants.

April 9, 2008 -- Forest Health and Invasive Species

Wednesday, April 9, 2008, 6 - 9 p.m. At the Human Services Building on Olde Towne Road. Chris Asaro, Forest Health Specialist, VA Dept. of Forestry, will describe the Impact of Invasive Species on Forest Health in Virginia.

May 14, 2008 -- Aquatic Insects and Water Quality

Wednesday, April 9, 2008, 6 - 9 p.m. At the Human Services Building on Olde Towne Road. Charlie Dubay, Jamestown High school will present a program on Aquatic Insects - Predictors of Water Quality.

More Advanced Training Opportunities

Each Master Naturalist needs 8 hours of Advanced Training to become certified and then another 8 hours each year after that. 2008 is a new year so most of us need 8 hours of advanced training. Check out these opportunities and mark your calendars. If you discover an event that you believe would qualify as Advanced Training, send information to Clyde Marsteller, Chair of the Advanced Training Committee, clydecedm@aol.com

The *Flora Virginia* Project, Tuesday, January 22, 10 am, Free at Williamsburg Library Theater

The Library and Williamsburg Garden Club will give the community an exciting preview of *Flora Virginia*, a combination manual and website. It is the first time that Virginia will have up to date information on species, illustrations and other critical components needed to identify Virginia's plants. Speaker Chris Ludwig is Chief Biologist, VA Department of Conservation and Recreation, Division of Natural Heritage, and co-author of *Flora Virginia*, slated for publication in 2011.

Virginia Native Plant Society (VNPS) and local John Clayton Chapter.

All programs and activities sponsored by the state and local chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society are approved for Advanced Training for HRC members. Their next monthly meeting is described below:

Ancient Tree Talk, Thursday, January 17, 2008 at 7:00 pm:

Byron Carmean and Gary Williamson, big-tree hunters who have contributed many records to the Virginia Big Tree List, will give a presentation about their discovery of an ancient water tupelo (*Nyssa aquatica*) and an ancient bald cypress (*Taxodium distichum*) in a swamp forest located near Courtland, Virginia in Southampton County. Carmean and Williamson report that these trees are 1500 years old and that there is a forest full of these big trees. In a recent visit to the site, participants were able to enter the cavernous hollows that had formed in some of these ancient trees and found themselves dwarfed by the height of the cypress knees! The meeting begins at 7:00 pm and takes place at the James City/Williamsburg Community Center located at 5301 Longhill Road in Williamsburg. Refreshments served. Free and open to the public.

Contact person: President Helen Hamilton, 564- 4494. Check the Web site regularly to learn the latest upcoming events: <http://www.claytonvnps.org>

Birdlife of Southeastern Virginia, Fridays, February 1, 8, 15, 22, 29 and March 14, 2008 from 1:30 p.m. to 3:30 p.m at William & Mary

This class is offered by Christopher Wren Association at William and Mary. Fee is \$75.00 and is registration is open to all. Instructor will be Bill Williams, Director of Education for the Center for Conservation Biology at W&M and a founder and past president of the Williamsburg Bird Club. For more info, visit their web site: www.wm.edu/cwa

"Walk and Talk," New Quarter Park. March 1, 2008

10:00 a.m. - 12:00 noon

Guest Speaker is Hugh Beard, Science Educator at Lafayette High School. Topic is "Signs of Spring" in New Quarter Park."

"Walk and Talk," New Quarter Park. April 5, 2008

10:00 a.m. - 12:00 noon

Topic is "Woody and Herbaceous Plants" with Dr. Stewart Ware and Dr. Donna Ware.

Volunteer Service Projects

The following projects have been approved. Feel free to contact the "go to" person listed for each event and find out how you can join in and earn those hours. Meanwhile, if you have a service project that you think will fit with HRC VMN talents, contact Cherie Aukland, Chair of the Volunteer Service Committee: aukland.c@cox.net

School Tree Counting Project

Counting the number of trees that are within 100 feet of the school for all of the James City County Schools for Dr. Jeff Kirwin at VA TECH. Volunteers will:

1. Go to the school site and count, measure, and record the types of trees and saplings within 100 feet of the school building.
2. Report data back to Dr. Kirwin for loading into the school site web page.

Contact: Kari Abbott, bearsbaskets@cox.net

Location: James City County Schools

Time Frame: One time project. The project will take about 1/2 day for each school and there are 8.

New Quarter Park Native Plant Teaching Garden

Here's an update on this project from Laurie Houghland:

Plans are underway to develop a native plant teaching trail at New Quarter Park in York County. The John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society has agreed to partner with us to restore an area just off the main parking lot that is easily accessible to most visitors to the park. Plans include development of a trail map and corresponding markers to be placed along the length of the trail. In the early spring, planting of rescued plants will occur under the guidance of the VNPS. Because water rushes through the area from the parking lot, a plan to slow the run-off by developing a "rain" garden or "bio-swale" is in the works. Several areas may be treated in this manner to slow the movement of the water. Several willing members from each group have offered their talents, but more are welcome. My hope is that 2008 will see the completion of the major work of this project with ongoing maintenance and instruction by those groups involved. If you have an interest and would like to work on this project, please contact Laurie Houghland at woowee@cox.net or by phone at 757-259-2169.

After School Bird Club at Coventry Elementary School in York County

Volunteers will be educational resources to help support an after school education program [bird club for 4th and 5th graders] between October 2007 and May 2008. This after school bird club meets every other Tuesday, but HRC members are not needed for all dates. Contact the "go to" person to see where you can help.

Contact: Susan Powell, 757-564-4542. Smapowell@cox.net

Trail & Garden Maintenance, York River State Park

This is an ongoing service project you can do anytime. Organized days are Tuesday mornings and Friday afternoons, but you can go out any time. Contact Mary Apperson at the Park, phone 566-3036 or email:

Mary.Apperson@dcr.virginia.gov

Project Toolbox [Master Naturalist in a Box!]

A collection of field guides, books, and other local information to assist any Master Naturalist who is out in the field in an interpretive capacity. Contact Larry Riddick to help complete this important cog in our contact with the public, larryriddick@cox.net

A Steward's Guide to the Universe – Driving

By Susan Powell, Historic Rivers Chapter, Virginia Master Naturalist Member

I fancy myself a good driver. I'm the one who usually drives my family to and from practically every event. I don't mind. It usually means I get to control the radio station and the temperature in the car.

A few months ago, I drove the lead car for the Advanced Training Geology Field Trip with Jerre Johnson. Now, you must understand, Shirley Devan and I spent a fair amount of time planning and talking about the details of the trip. Because our Chapter is brand new, Shirley and I tried to think through all the typical risk management and safety issues, and I was taking great care to adhere to our safety protocol.

Our group had just finished exploring the fossils at Lake Matoaka Dam and Spillway, and I was pleased and relieved that no one had fallen into the water, or down the hill. So far, so good.

I, along with Jerre Johnson, hubby Mike, and Cherie Aukland, piled into my car, and proceeded toward our next destination – “DOG” Street in Colonial Williamsburg. We were going to get up close and personal with the steps leading into Talbot's, and maybe invite a few visitors to CW to join us. Because I was driving the lead car, I was multi-tasking – watching for traffic, making sure we are all together, taking directions from Jerre on where to park, and trying to soak up a little roadside geology.

After a few stops, I began to notice that when we all got into the car, Jerre would watch me start the car. Of course, in my mind I was thinking – “I must demonstrate that I am cognizant of safety.” So, I put the key into the ignition, started the car, made sure to fasten my seat belt, and waited for everyone else to fasten his or hers. That is when it all started.

Jerre looked at me and said, simply, “Belts first.”

As I said before, I was multi-tasking – trying to make sure the group was together, listening for directions on where next to go, and, above all, I was thinking about safety. I was thinking, “My seatbelt is on. I have waited for others to put their seatbelt on. Clearly, I have demonstrated my desire to be safe.”

Well... the same thing happened at our next stop. When we all piled into the car to proceed to the next stop, Jerre leaned over and again said, “Belts first.”

Again, I was thinking, “Okay, okay, I'm putting on my seatbelt – seeee.”

When we arrived at the next site, the minute I put the car in park, Jerre leaned over, grabbed the key, and turned off the ignition. I was in the middle of putting up the window! He started laughing – probably at the look of bewilderment on my face. I was about to protest when he explained that I did not need to have the ignition turned on to roll up the windows. Just turn the key back one notch, and you can still put up the windows without burning gas.

That is when I realized what he was trying to get across to me. It had nothing to do with safety. He was trying to help me conserve energy.

For as long as I have driven a car, my routine has been to start the car - first thing. Then I secure my seat belt, check the mirrors, find my radio station, and so forth. It feels as though this process has been burned into my muscle memory. I'm finding it hard to change this habit.

Nevertheless, Jerre is absolutely right. I need to change my ways. Although it is a difference of just a minute's worth of gas consumption, those minutes add up over time.

Even though I was a little embarrassed (and suffered a few snickers from the back seat), I'm very glad Jerre took the time to point out a way in which I could help conserve energy. Jerre is a true steward and a great role model. Thanks, Jerre, for the tip.

James City Service Authority's New Rain Barrel Rebate

[Thanks go to Angela Scott for alerting us about this new county effort to save water. Information below is from JCSA web site.]

Efficient water use is becoming increasingly important in James City County and around the nation. Ours is one of the fastest growing localities in Virginia, but our groundwater supply is limited. That's why we must use our water wisely.

The James City Service Authority is the largest water utility in Virginia that is primarily reliant on groundwater for its water supply. In the peak summer months, 60 to 70 percent of municipal water used by James City County residents is used for landscape irrigation. If that demand can be reduced, we all benefit.

Presenting our New Rain Barrel Rebate -- beginning January 1, 2008. The James City Service Authority has created a rebate on rain barrels to reduce demand for municipal water and preserve its precious groundwater supply.

JCSA will refund the purchase price of up to four rain barrels, with a maximum of \$50 per rain barrel. By installing a rain barrel and conserving municipal water, you can:

- save money,
- ensure water availability for emergencies like firefighting especially during summer,
- reduce stormwater runoff to protect our waterways,
- increase groundwater recharge and health,
- promote a conscientious culture of wise water use and conservation; and,
- receive a \$50 rebate!*

Check the web site for additional details and “how to”

www.bewatersmart.org/rainbarrelrebateprogram/RainBarrelRebate.html

Check next month's newsletter for the next 10 ways to save water.

A Photo from the Holiday Party



Laurie Houghland and Scott Deane enjoy burritos at Annual Meeting and Holiday Party.

A Love Affair with Texas Tanks

By Clyde Marsteller, Historic Rivers Chapter, Virginia Master Naturalist Member and Major, Medical Service Corps, US Army (retired)

A funny thing happens when you heed Horace Greeley's (actually John B. L. Soule) advice, "Go West Young Man Go West!" and you cross the Mississippi River. The language changes. Ponds become tanks, gullies become arroyos, skunks turn into polecats, snakes are called worms, all of the sunfish clan are collectively call perch, stripped bass are sandies and oil turns into Texas tea. Pronunciation is a challenge. Bexar is pronounced Bear, Mexia is Me Hee Ya, and my friend Jesus is called Hey Zeus.

Every Texas town is the world capital of something and it is proudly displayed on the town water supply a huge tank towering over the landscape (along with Billy Bob loves Peggy Sue).

Wildlife is just plain strange. There are ring tailed cats that look like a cross between a fox and a raccoon; there is a wild cat called an Ocelot that looks like a small leopard; armadillos that look like something out of the Jurassic Park; road runners that don't go beep beep; horned toads that aren't toads and squirt blood out of their eyes; scorpions; wild pigs called peccaries; and a bird called a Chachalaca. The local whitetail deer rarely exceed 40 lbs and my first kill dressed out at 22 lbs. A jack rabbit I shot weighed in at 12 lbs and looked bigger than the deer.

Getting back to Texas tanks. Ellie worked as the head office nurse for a local surgeon. Another nurse on the staff, Pat Mc. , invited us to a weekend at their home. Pat and her husband Webb had a small ranch outside of town. Webb worked as a ranch hand on a middlin sized spread nearby (a "middlin" spread is about 10,000 acres). After a typical Texas barbecue supper Webb and I were filling in the corners (like a hobbit) with munchies and Pearl beer when he suggested we go frog hunting. He said he had a small tank on his property that was loaded with bullfrogs. He got a sack, two flashlights and his two blue tick hounds. He explained we would be the "finders" and the dawgs would do the catchin'. By now it was pitch black as I followed Webb to the tank. He said we would not turn the flashlights on until we were in position at the tank's edge. The sudden light would freeze the frogs long enough for the hounds to grab a couple.

As we got close to the tank the mesquite grew thick and soon we were crawling on our hands and knees along a cattle path. I had two unpleasant thoughts. One was: is this a Texas version of a Snipe hunt? The second one was: what about snakes? About this time Webb stopped and whispered to me to "Watch out for Stinging Worms."

I asked what in the h--- was a Stinging Worm? He replied, "You know --- the kind that's gots rattles on the end." I immediately froze. Webb continued, "You don't have to worry. They only bite if you step on one or the guy ahead of you scares them."

About this time I was told that we were at the tank and we were to turn the lights on. Spread out in front of me was a shallow pond filled with glowing eyes. The dogs howled and dove into the water. There were dozens of splashes and the dogs came up to Webb with two of the biggest bullfrogs I had ever seen. Two in the sack. Lights off and smoke a cigarette (yes I smoked then). Lights on and two more frogs. This went on for about an hour or two until my sack was bulging with frogs. We carried them home where they were separated from their legs and became instant hog feed. Next day was frog leg eatin' heaven.

Evidently I passed the Good Old Boy Frog Test and I was invited to go on a fishing trip the following weekend.

The next Friday afternoon found Ellie and Pat getting supper together while Webb and I went out to catch some "baits." I got into his ranch cadillac, an old Ford pickup with a 30-30 rifle and a 12 gauge shotgun hanging on a rack in the rear window. There was an ancient Coca-Cola cooler in the bed filled with ice and beer. We drove to a General Store where Webb announced to two fellows playing Dominoes that we needed a third hand to catch some baits. One of the players came over and was introduced as Jake. The three of us drove out to a cattle ranch, crossed a cattle guard (a series of pipes over a trench that cattle won't cross), and drove down to a large tank. Webb got out a seine. He said he and Jake would take the ends and I was the middle man. The plan was to wade out to waist deep water, extend the net into a semi circle and drag it towards shore. In my innocence I remarked I didn't have a swimming suit. After my companions stopped laughing their fool heads off, we shucked off our clothes and waded into the muddy stinking water. I asked about cottonmouth "worms" and was told not to worry that they didn't bite underwater (ever wonder how they catch fish?). I was to walk carefully and not to step on a "Stinger." I started to ask what a Stinger was when I stepped on a red hot poker. The pain exploded up my leg as I screamed and hopped to shore. Sticking in the sole of my foot was a small catfish. My erstwhile friends were hooping and laughing. I pulled the fish out and got a pectoral fin sticker in my finger to add insult to injury. By this time Webb and Jake had pulled the net up on shore. It was filled with all kinds of "perch," bass and catfish. The small ones went into the cooler and the large ones went into the frog sack for a fish fry later. I was offered two emergency treatments for my wound(pronounced as the past tense of wind). One was to have Jake spit tobacco juice from the plug he was chawin' on or to have it flushed out with vinegar from an old mason jar. I chose the vinegar. The pain immediately stopped but I limped for a week.

After supper Webb loaded a mattress, blankets, cookware and food onto the truck bed. We drove out to his boss's ranch (men in the cab and the women in the back of the truck) where we were introduced to the ranch manager. It turned out that there were several large tanks (big enough to be called lakes) filled with bass that needed "thinning." We pulled into a picnic area complete with restrooms, tables, and grills on a small spit jutting out into the tank. The water was 10 to 12 feet deep on all sides and crystal clear. Stacked in layers were hundreds of bass 12 to 18 inches long. It looked like a fish hatchery. The manager told us to catch as many as we could because the fish were "stunted."

We set up camp , put the coffee on, and started to fish. We would hook on one of the "perch" from the cooler and drop it in the water. Immediately the bass would attack it. It was like watching sharks in a feeding frenzy. When the bite slowed down we would fish the on the other side. We fished all night and it was the first time in my life that I got cramps in my arms from catching fish. We stopped fishing at sunrise to eat breakfast.

Now this was a working cattle ranch and next to the picnic area was a large hopper filled with food concentrates. It automatically dispensed cattle feed at set times during the day and sunrise was one of them. The ranch ran several dozen of yearling cattle in our particular "pasture." They were being fattened up for market. As they ambled up to eat Webb said , " Watch this." He grabbed one of them by the ear and led it to the rear of the tuck. Ellie and Pat were still sound asleep with Ellie laying with her head on the tailgate. Webb pulled the cow's head over Ellie and it licked her face with its big sloppy tongue. Ellie woke up, saw the cow's muzzle over her, screamed, levitated about a foot in the air and hit the ground running. Cost of the fishing trip: many gifts and meals out, and many, many apologies. Watching Ellie's face when she saw the cow: priceless.

Audubon Christmas Bird Counts – Stories from the Field

Tabb Sector -- December 15, 2007

By Susie Engle-Hill, Historic Rivers Chapter, Virginia Master Naturalist Member

Saturday, December 15th, was a bitter, blustery, bleak day. Even so, several members of the Hampton Roads Bird Club and Historic Rivers Chapter of the Virginia Master Naturalists braved the sharp winds and damp chill to conduct the Annual Audubon Christmas Bird Count. Through 18 pre-arranged monitoring areas of the Tabb Zone, they covered pastoral fields, marshy mouths of creeks, housing development drainage ponds, pokeweed filled junkyards, and a no-shouldered narrow road along a reservoir. They were rewarded with the largest species count in recent memory. From tiny Ruby-crowned Kinglets, to Redhead Ducks, to an impressive pair of Bald Eagles, they counted and recorded all identified sightings.

Coordinated by experienced leader, Tim Christiansen, they gathered data from 7:30 am until 4:00 pm. Afterward, Tim formalized the data and took it to a site across town (Jim Hill's Wildwings Store in Hidenwood). This was the rendezvous spot for all area leaders to report their findings. In turn, this information will be forwarded to Audubon in combination with data from all over North and Central America. For those interested in joining in the fun, the Annual Spring Count will be held in April. Warmer weather is almost guaranteed. What a great opportunity for Citizen Scientists!

The final tally of observed species was 51! This exceeded the number in all other counts for this sector. We would have had a couple more if not for the mystery sandpipers and a couple of hawks that got away...

Here's the list of species observed: European starling, Mourning dove, American goldfinch, Carolina chickadee, Double-crested cormorant, American Robin (340!), Northern flicker, Tufted titmouse, House finch, White throated sparrow, Redwing blackbird, Blue jay, Turkey vulture, Northern cardinal, Cedar waxwing, Northern mockingbird, Dark-eyed junco, Eastern bluebird, Yellow-rumped warbler, American crow, Carolina wren, Common grackle, Red-bellied woodpecker, Black vulture,, Canada goose, Red-tailed hawk, Great blue heron, Ruby-crowned kinglet, Song sparrow, Field sparrow, Ring-billed gull, Herring gull, White-breasted nuthatch, Pine warbler, Common loon, Downy woodpecker, Coopers hawk, Sharp-shinned hawk, Bald eagle, Pied-billed grebe, Belted kingfisher, Hooded merganser, Ring-neck duck, Redhead, American coot, Fox sparrow, Ruddy duck, Bufflehead, Mallard, Black duck, Brown-headed cowbird

Harpersville Sector -- December 15

By Shirley Devan, Historic Rivers Chapter, Virginia Master Naturalist Member

This was the first time I had participated in the Hampton Roads Bird Club's Audubon Christmas Bird Count. Fellow Club member Susan Powell and I joined Jane Frigo and Mark Nichols at Sandy Bottom Nature Park at 7:00 a.m. Saturday, December 15. Jane is the Sector Leader for the "Harpersville" area which includes parts of Newport News and Hampton. Truthfully, I had no idea where we were most of the day. I was a happy passenger as Jane drove around the mostly urban area.

We spent about three hours at Sandy Bottom Nature Park and explored the back trails and ponds on foot. We probably walked about 2 miles. This is definitely a park I want to explore again now that I know what's there.

Then we spent most of the rest of the day driving to "pockets of nature" tucked in around neighborhoods, churches, and schools. We ended the day at Deer Park just off J. Clyde Morris Blvd. trying desperately to get a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. Finally Susan and Jane found one and we headed back to Jane's house to tally our birds and prepare for the sector tally at 5 pm.

We ended the day with 61 species. The highlight was the Baltimore Oriole we found bathing at our "Spring Trace" stop. [I have no idea where in Newport News we were, but Jane labeled it the "Spring Trace" stop so that's where we found it!] We saw several Rusty Blackbirds and American Robins splashing in the creek on the side of the road. We probably would have counted more Rusty Blackbirds but we were quickly distracted by the front-and-center Baltimore Oriole, only about 15 feet away from us. All of us got great looks at it. We determined it was a hatch year female. Very distinctive and the only one found on the Hampton Roads Count. We were thrilled.

The "Harpersville Sector Count Support Award" goes to Mike Powell, Susan's husband. About 11 am he and son Alex met us at Chestnut Memorial Methodist Church and surprised us with a CANNISTER of Starbucks coffee and two packages of cookies from Costco. Jane had promised we would go by a 7-11 at some point in the day, but we were cold and hungry by 11 and no 7-11 was in sight. The coffee and cookies revived us, and Mike and Alex joined us for the rest of the day's stops. By the way, we did not pass a 7-11 until about 4 in the afternoon!

Jamestown Sector --December 16, 2007

By Kathi Mestayer, Historic Rivers Chapter, Virginia Master Naturalist Member

Last Sunday was our first Christmas Bird Count (my husband Mac had been on one years ago, but it was in the spring). We were assigned to work with W&M faculty member Dan Cristol, who was to cover Jamestown island and surrounds. Almost immediately, we realized we were going to have to walk a lot faster to keep up, and that we were not going to need our bird books -- Dan is encyclopedic. We drove around in Dan's car, windows open (in case we spotted anything out the window) and heat blasting, and must've stopped at 20 places. He would jump out and start calling out the names of birds, and occasionally bring the spotting scope. The scope was amazing; there's stuff out there that you can't see at all even with your binoculars! Like red-headed mergansers. Mac and I added a couple of things to our life list: a fox sparrow and snipe. After coming home, Mac was looking out the front window and said, "Kathi, I think there's an oriole in the camellia!" I tiptoed over, not wanting to scare it away, and there it was, not even noticing us on the other side of the window glass (the camellia is right in front of the window; some of the branches touch). We ran and got the Petersen bird book, and identified it as an immature male baltimore oriole. Then we called Dan to report it, and he said to write down everything we saw, where, when, who, all field marks, behaviors. So while we were doing that, and arguing over whether there were 2 or 3 wing bars, that little bird came back into the bush to let us have another look! We've seen it twice more since then, and I wedged a half grapefruit in the branches of the camellia. The oriole was the only one spotted in the Williamsburg Bird Count, so it made the reporting meeting exciting for us.

Jolly Pond Sector --December 16, 2007

By Alice Kopinitz, Historic Rivers Chapter, Virginia Master Naturalist Member

We were assigned to the Jolly Pond sector for the Christmas Bird Count along with Leader, Lee Schuster, Alex Minarik and Shirley Devan.

We had just gotten into the car, heading for our first stop, when Lee spotted a "bird" in the top of a tree beside the road. Slow down, watch the traffic, turn around, find a place to stop and look. Sure enough, there was a red shouldered hawk watching from his lofty perch. Well, that was a great beginning and so we were off.

After several hours, it was break time. We stopped at the small gas station/store on Centerville Road. Looking at birds was what you do, even if taking a break. Looking up, we noticed a large bird heading our way. It turned out to be an adult Bald Eagle. The bird was paralleling the road, I lost sight as he flew over the gas station roof, but he soon came into view. Then he spread his talons and swooped down into the road (there is a berm there and again our view was blocked). When he reappeared he was holding a dead squirrel and flying off over a house was next to the store. Just about that time a woman came out of her door. The movement/noise or something caused the eagle to drop his prey. The poetic justice would be to say that the dead squirrel landed on the woman's head or at least her roof, but alas, it did not. We watched for awhile, hoping the eagle would return, but he did not and we pressed on.

Rare Bird Shows Up in Kathi Mestayer's Tulip Poplar

By Shirley Devan, *Historic Rivers Chapter, Virginia Master Naturalist Member*

Yes, the same Kathi Mestayer who had the only Baltimore Oriole on the Williamsburg Christmas Bird Count, now has a rare Townsend's Solitaire flitting between the cedar, the tulip poplar, and the bird bath!

Virginia birders are traveling from hundreds of miles to Kathi's house on Gilley Drive in Williamsburg to get this life bird, year bird, and/or state bird.

About 11 am on New Year's Day, Kathi called me and announced "We've got a Townsend's Solitaire in our yard!" I jumped in the car and arrived 10 minutes later. I had never seen one before in my life but Kathi and her husband Mac had and they were confident this Northern Mockingbird look-alike was a Townsend's Solitaire. I saw the bird and compared it to the picture in the Field Guide. I was convinced but this rarity needed serious verification.

Kathi and I related the bird's visit to those who ventured to Greensprings Trail for the Bird Club's New Year's Day Boardwalk Bird Show. Alex Minarik told me that if I heard from Kathi the next day, I should pick her up on the way over to Kathi's house.

The next morning at 9:30 am Kathi called to say that the bird was still in the yard -- at the bird bath, in the tulip poplar. Alex Minarik and I immediately drove over to find it. I called Susan and Mike Powell and they arrived shortly after. We alerted Brian Taber, Coastal Virginia Wildlife Observatory President, who lives in Wmsbg and he came over.

We all observed the bird from about 10:15 am - 11:30 am. Most of the time it was in a massive red cedar tree eating berries. Then he flew to the bird bath. Then to a limb on the tulip poplar. The weather was not ideal for standing around outside: 31 degrees, snow flurries, windy.

Alex Minarik, Brian Taber, and Susan Powell confirmed that it was indeed a Townsend's Solitaire, normally a Western Bird. In fact, it is not even listed in Eastern Field Guides.

Then it was time to start making phone calls and setting up spotting scopes and cameras. Mike Powell, with a 600mm lens on a Canon digital SLR, got several great shots, including the one on this page. I was able to digiscope a 19 second movie while the bird was in the bird bath and my husband posted it to YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=MYoyfKL9TN0

I excitedly placed phone calls to Dan Cristol and Ruth Beck, local ornithologists. Both arrived later in the day and marveled at the appearance of such a rarity. Unfortunately, Bill Williams is in Ecuador and could not be reached.

When I got home I posted an announcement about the Solitaire to the List Serve for the Virginia Society for Ornithology. Over 800 birders in Virginia and surrounding states subscribe to this email listing. I warned Kathi that if she gave me permission to list her name, address, and phone number, she should be prepared for an influx of birders, cars, and serious optics. She happily gave the go-ahead and I posted the information about the Townsend Solitaire the afternoon of January 2.

Since then the YouTube video has been viewed 251 times. There are often 3 or more cars in front of Kathi's house during daylight hours. Birders from all over the state have enjoyed spectacular views of the Townsend's Solitaire plus more. Two Baltimore Orioles have put on quite a show as well! Plus Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, Red-shouldered Hawks, Cooper's Hawk, Brown Creeper, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Northern Cardinals, Dark-eyed Juncos, White-throated Sparrows, Cedar Waxings, American Robins, plus more.

We cannot overstate our "thanks" to Kathi and Mac Mestayer for their gracious hospitality -- welcoming listers and twitchers to their front and back yard. Kathi has graciously answered the phone and given directions. Kathi's neighbors are even nice. Jane Beavers who visited January 5 from Virginia Beach asked one neighbor if we were disturbing her and she stated "not at all. I love birders; they are the nicest quietest people I know." Watch next month's newsletter for more info about how long the bird visits Kathi's yard.



Townsend's Solitaire. Photo by Mike Powell, Master Naturalist Member.