

The SISKIN

Newsletter of the Northern Virginia Bird Club

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Winter Highland Trip

Our winter trip to Highland County will be held on the weekend of February 27 to March 1 (Friday to Sunday). Late winter is an excellent time to visit Highland County, especially for its wintering Golden Eagles, Rough-legged Hawks, winter finches and wonderful winter scenery. On last year's trip, we saw a total of 62 species. Highlight sightings in the Augusta and Staunton area were a Snow Goose, Red-necked Grebe, White-winged Scoter, Northern Harrier and Clay-colored Sparrow. In Highland County, we found Golden Eagle, Eastern Screech Owl, Black-capped Chickadees, Horned Lark and American Tree Sparrow. While we missed Rough-legged Hawk and the winter finches because they were very scarce last winter, this winter is already very good for Pine Siskins and Purple Finches and we will make a concerted effort to find Rough-legged Hawks.

Plans for the weekend include birding the Augusta area Friday afternoon starting at 1:00 pm (optional) with an overnight stay at the Staunton Best Western. On Saturday morning we will drive to and bird northern Highland County with an overnight stay in Monterey. Unfortunately, the charming Highland Inn has closed and is up for sale. Instead, we will be staying at the Montvallee Motel. After birding southern Highland County Sunday morning, the trip will conclude at noon.

NVBC membership is required for this trip. To sign up for this trip, call or email Elton Morel at 703-553-4860 or eltonlmorel@verizon.net. The trip will be co-led by Beth Moore and the trip is limited to 16 people and usually fills up, so please contact Elton Morel first to ensure that space is available and for information to place hotel reservations. If the trip is full, your name can be put on a waiting list

—Elton Morel

NVBC GENERAL MEETING—WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 18, 8 PM

The Exquisite Birds of Ecuador

Speaker Bob Mumford

Bob Mumford's presentation on "The Exquisite Birds of Ecuador" will include 150 bird photographs taken during 16 trips to Ecuador. Bob became a fanatic birder after retiring from the Navy. His North American list exceeds 760. Now he focuses on capturing wildlife and landscapes through photography. Bob is a fantastic photographer whose work has appeared in many publications, including National Wildlife Magazine, Birding, Birder's World and Howard Youth's book *A Field Guide to the Natural World In Washington, D.C.* Bob also authored *Spring Comes to Washington*. His recently published book *The Exquisite Birds of Ecuador* includes over 300 images of birds taken within the past 7 years. Bob visited approximately 60 sites including the Napo River and the Pacific coast of Ecuador. His web site naturalimags.com contains 80 of the images included in his book. Copies of his book will be for sale at the meeting.



Early bird refreshments start at 7:30 pm. Any contributions of food or beverage will be most gratefully received.

There will be a drawing for door prizes.

Northern Virginia Bird Club pins will be available for members who would like to buy them (\$5 each).

MEETING PLACE: St. Andrews Episcopal Church, 4000 Lorcom Lane, Arlington, 22207. Directions are on page 5.

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To see the newsletter photographs in color, go to www.nvabc.org and click on the *Siskin* icon

A reminder to pay your 2015 dues

If not paid, this will be the last issue you receive. The *Siskin* mailing label shows the year through which your dues are current or "CO" for complimentary. Thanks!

Presidential Peentings

Because of the information revolution, the resources available to birders in the twenty-first century seem almost miraculous compared to what people used in much of the twentieth century. It was not that long ago when the only way to learn about rare bird sightings, other than word of mouth, was to call the rare bird alert number and listen to a taped message. With the internet, we now have eBird, listservs such as VABird, and social media such as Facebook to get the word out about rarities. The internet also makes it easier for bird clubs to organize trips and communicate with members. I have found that eBird is one of the most powerful birding tools. Not only can you keep all of your world, national, state and county lists, you can also explore hotspots, find species that you are looking for, and set up personal rare bird alerts. With smartphones, birders can take it to another level as they can now dial up field guide apps, enter lists from the field, and instantly alert other birders of rarities that they are looking at. Digital cameras have also changed birding. Not only are these cameras essential for documenting rare birds, now more people than ever can enjoy bird photos because of the many talented photographers that are out there snapping away. In birding, the future is now.

—Larry Meade

A note from longtime NVBC member and Maryland resident

I seldom cross the Potomac River for birding, however I frequently bird with other NVBC members. In April 2012, I met Marc Ribaud in Colorado. In September 2013, I met Jean Tatalias in California. In July 2014, I was in Grayling, Michigan. Upon arriving 15 minutes before the start of the Kirtland's Warbler Tour, I found one other person in the parking lot, Larry Meade!

—Glen Richardson

RIO GRANDE VALLEY BIRDING FESTIVAL

The 2014 Rio Grande Valley Birding Festival (RGVBF) turned out to offer just the sort of opportunity Glen Richardson mentions. At least half a dozen NVBC members joined some 600 plus birders from all over the US and several other countries for the 21st year of this granddaddy of festivals. It takes place in early November and is headquartered in Harlingen, Texas, close to the mouth of the Rio Grande and not many miles from the border with Mexico. Pat Blyer, a NVBC member who currently lives in the Richmond area, and I were first-time attendees.

As you would expect from such a well-established event, the planning and organization at RGVBF is excellent. The five-day schedule offers a wide variety of field trips with venues scattered throughout the Rio Grande Valley, along the Gulf Coast, and north into ranching country. There are bus trips, van trips, boat trips, parrot chases—so much to choose from. The trip leaders come from all over, but almost all the ones we met had a lot of South Texas birding experience and they all did a good job.

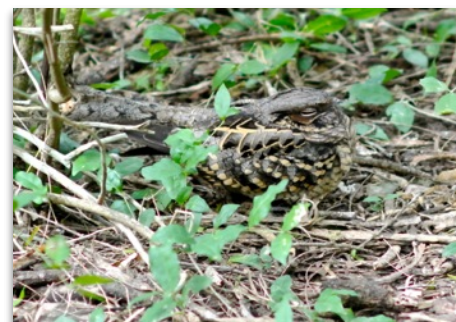
The ratio of leaders to birders ran about 1:10, so there was a lot of help available.

Not having much South Texas birding experience myself, I had lots of opportunities to see new birds. In fact, I picked up “lifers” every day, including arrival day when we just had time to join Pat and Neal Gause in an afternoon walk at the Hugh Ramsey Nature Park, within the Harlingen city limits. I’m not sure which was the coolest new bird. But a candidate for coolest name has to be the Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet—more name than bird. We saw the Groove-billed Ani, although it took all afternoon at the South Padre Island Convention Center to stake out this fellow; and my first Common Pauraque, which took no time at all since there were two sitting a few feet off the trail at Estero Llano Grande State Park, just where everyone told us they would be. Along with Larry Meade, we took the field trip to the Upper Rio Grande led by Jeff Gordon, ABA President, and when he shouted “Red-billed Pigeon” I managed to get my bins up for a reasonably good first-time look at this fast-flyer. From the same bluff looking over the river into Mexico we had wonderful views of Zone-Tailed Hawk, first appearing as a Turkey Vulture wanna-be, and then circling round to show off its banded tail. A notable miss was Hook-billed Kite. The ranger at Bentsen-Rio Grande State Park who was one of our trip leaders was very excited to have a pair of these circle over head while we were there. But at that point they had split the group in half—and Pat and I were in the other half. I can see why people return to this festival and to the valley. I just might be among them—after all, I have to go back for that kite...

—Catherine Kubo



*Grooved-bill Ani at South Padre Island.
Photographed by Larry Meade*



*Photographs above:
Great Kiskadee at Hugh Ramsey Nature Park and
Common Pauraque at Estero Llano Grande State
Park by Neal Gause
Green Jay at Laguna Atascosa NWR by Larry
Meade*

A Day of Christmas Bird Counting

Elton Morel, Catherine Kubo and I met at the entrance to Silver Lake Park at 7:00 am to begin our day of birding for The Plains Christmas Bird Count Circle. This was the first day of the count period which always runs from December 14 to January 5. Christmas Bird Counts have been around for over one hundred years and are an important source of information about wintering birds. Birders can contribute important data as they participate in true citizen science.

The Plains circle is mostly in Fauquier County, but all of our sector is in Prince William County near Haymarket. The other large venue we planned to cover was North Fork Wetlands (AKA Camp Snyder). However, that location was only available to us from 8:00 until 11:00. We decided to bird part of Silver Lake in the morning and to later go back to finish up there in the afternoon. We would bird North Fork in between.

We first checked the quarry pond at Silver Lake hoping to catch any roosting waterfowl before they took off for the day. Our efforts were rewarded as we found a pair of Redheads, two dozen Ring-necked Ducks and a Bufflehead. We experienced another highlight as we watched four Bald Eagles fly over us at a fairly low altitude. Most of the other birds were the usual suspects, but we did tally our only Hermit Thrushes and Yellow-rumped Warbler of the day.

At around 9:00 am we headed over to North Fork Wetlands. After we checked in at the office, we headed over

to the water. Here we found American Tree Sparrows, White-crowned Sparrows, an Eastern Phoebe, and a Red-tailed Hawk. At the large gravel parking lot, we saw a Killdeer take off and watched an American Pipit fly over. We ate lunch at Foster's Grille in Haymarket. We then cruised through the Walmart parking lot in a failed attempt to add House Sparrows to our list. However, we did find a perched and photogenic juvenile Red-shouldered Hawk.

Back at Silver Lake Park we found Chipping Sparrows, a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Brown Creepers and a pair of Hooded Mergansers. A Common Raven flew over us croaking repeatedly. We then headed back to North Fork, but this time we birded from outside the property

Continued on p. 6

Juvenile Red-shouldered Hawk at Haymarket. Photograph by Larry Meade.



Whooping Cranes in Texas, A Post-Festival Trip

After attending the RGVBF, I took the post-festival trip to Rockport, Texas, to see Whooping Cranes. The cranes come to Aransas National Wildlife Refuge for their wintering grounds. The whoopers do not keep in flocks, but stay in separate territories for each pair and their young. We took a morning boat trip into the refuge and had excellent views of a number of family groups, including some displaying pairs. What a great sight these magnificent birds are!

Our guides for the three day trip were Michael O'Brien, co-author of The Shorebird Guide, and Louise Zemaitis, also a popular Cape May guide. A second highlight on the trip was on a country road not far out of Corpus Christi. On our first pass we found a muddy field filled with long billed curlews—nearly 300 of them. They were incredibly well camouflaged. It wasn't until lumps on the field began to move slightly that my eye could pick up more and more and more as they fed in the mud. On the drive back the curlews were gone, but we had fantastic views of a ferruginous hawk, first soaring and then perched. This was a life bird for me and one a bit out of his territory. But as Louise pointed out, we had a small slice of prairie in this terrain and habitat is everything.

I enjoyed seeing a mixed flock of gulls huddled together, allowing for species comparisons. We even had a juvenile Thayer's Gull. Similarly, we had three tern species side by side on the beach providing great close up looks. And overhead we had Redheads in the hundreds streaming across the wetlands. This is a fantastic birding trip.

—Jean Tatalias



Walking the trail at Riverbend Park. Photo by Pat Gause

Birds and Trees ID Walk

Have you ever been on a bird walk when the leader calls out a bird, you say, "Where is it?" and the leader says, "Over there in the green tree"? I have. It's also frustrating as a leader, with many variations on the same theme. For me to be a better leader on bird walks, I need to learn to identify trees and to describe them better.

On Saturday, March 7, 2015, at Riverbend Park in Fairfax County, NVBC will conduct a special walk that will include the identification of trees as well as birds. With the help of Joanne Hutton – an NVBC club member and a Master Gardener and Master Naturalist – we will practice identifying trees as well as birds. While there aren't very many leaves on the trees in March, this is a good opportunity to learn the trees in terms of their shape, structure, placement and bark. If you have a tree identification guide, feel free to bring it along. And we won't forget to check the river for wintering ducks. So please join us below the Visitor's Center at Riverbend Park at 8:00 am. NVBC plans to schedule another Birds and Trees ID Walk in June when there are leaves on the trees.

—Elton Morel



Whooping Crane at Aransas NWR photographed by Larry Meade

Upcoming Trips and Events

Compiled by Elton Morel

Note:

- Beginning birders are welcome on all trips.
- When reservations are required, please call one of the trip leaders. Phone numbers are on page 6.
- If in doubt about a trip because of weather, please call one of the leaders.
- Check the NVBC website for updated information about trips: <http://www.nvabc.org/trips.htm>.

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
<u>February</u>				12 8:30 AM Eakin Park Elizabeth Fenton Catherine Kubo		14 8 AM Aquia Landing Beach Park David Ledwith Elton Morel
		18 8 PM NVBC Meeting	19 8:30 AM Silver Lake SP Catherine Kubo Phil Silas			21 8 AM Mason Neck SP Larry Cartwright
		25 8:30 AM Dyke Marsh Dave Boltz Bryan Peters			February 27 - March 1 Highland County Winter Weekend <i>Members only/reservations required</i> Beth Moore Elton Morel	
<u>March 1</u> 8 AM Dyke Marsh Friends of Dyke Marsh (FODM)		4 8:30 AM Long Branch Dave Boltz Elizabeth Fenton				7 8 AM Riverbend Park - Visitor Center Birds & Trees ID Walk Joanne Hutton Elton Morel
8 6:30 PM Woodcock Display at Dusk - Huntley Meadows Hike/Bike Trail Larry Cartwright Rich Rieger				12 8:30 AM Burke Lake Catherine Kubo Ruth Schrott		14 8 AM Aquia Landing Beach Park David Ledwith Elton Morel
		18 8:30 AM Dyke Marsh Dave Boltz Larry Cartwright				21 8 AM Leesylvania SP Larry Meade Phil Silas
				26 8:30 AM Eakin Park Elizabeth Fenton Catherine Kubo		28 8 AM Occoquan Bay NWR David Ledwith Marc Ribaud
		<u>April 1</u> 8:30 AM Long Branch Elizabeth Fenton Jean Tatalias				4 7:30 AM Huntley Meadows Dave Boltz Larry Cartwright

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
April 5 8 AM Dyke Marsh (FODM)			8 8:30 AM Bles Park Dixie Sommers Jean Tatalias			11 7:30 AM Silver Lake SP Larry Meade
			15 8:30 AM Walker Nature Center Bryan Peters			18 7:30 AM Algonkian RP Elton Morel Ruth Schrott
		22 8 PM NVBC Meeting		23 8:30 AM Fort C.F. Smith Joanna Taylor		25 7:30 AM Leesylvania SP Steve Bruck Marc Ribauda
				30 8:30 AM Daniels Run Catherine Kubo Dixie Sommers	May	2 7:30 AM Huntley Meadows- Hike/Bike Trail Dave Boltz Elton Morel
3 8 AM Dyke Marsh (FODM)			6 8:30 AM Long Branch Dave Boltz Elizabeth Fenton			9 7:30 AM Trillium Trail David Ledwith Elton Morel

DIRECTIONS

NVBC Meeting (2/18, 4/22) St. Andrews Episcopal Church, 4000 Lorcom Ln, Arlington 22207, at the intersection of Lorcom Ln and Military Rd. From the intersection of Spout Run Pkwy and Lorcom Ln, go about a half mile on Lorcom to the second traffic light. Turn left onto Military and enter the first driveway on the right. There is some parking near the Church's back entrance and a bigger lot up the driveway. There is on-street parking. Enter at the back door facing Military Rd which leads to the Undercroft where the meeting is held.

Algonkian Regional Park (4/18) 47001 Fairway Dr, Sterling 20165 From I-495, take Rt 7 west 11 miles (mi.) to Cascades Pkwy north and drive 3 mi. to the park entrance. Proceed on Fairway Dr turning left onto Volcano Island Dr, then turn right into parking lot. Meet at the parking lot beside restrooms and Park Shelter 1.

Aquia Landing Beach Park (2/14, 3/14) 2846 Brooke Rd, Stafford 22554 From southbound I-95 towards Stafford, take exit 140 to Stafford, then left (east) on Courthouse Rd (Rt 630), go 3.5 mi. and turn right on Andrew Chapel Rd (Rt 629), go 0.9 mi. and under the railroad bridge to a slight left onto Brooke Rd (Rt 608), go 4.4 mi. to the part entrance, continue past park entrance gate to the parking lot at the end of the road. Meet in the parking lot.

Bles Park (4/8) 44830 Riverside Pkwy., Ashburn 20147 Take Rt 7 west to Loudoun County Pkwy. Turn right onto Loudoun County Pkwy and proceed 0.2 mi. Turn right onto George Washington Blvd and go 0.8 mi. to Riverside Pkwy. Turn left and proceed 1.1 mi. to park entrance. Meet at parking lot.

Burke Lake Park (3/12) 7315 Ox Rd, Fairfax Station 22039 From I-495, take exit 54 west (Braddock Rd). Stay in right lane of exit if you are coming from the north. On Braddock Rd, go 1.5 mi. and turn left onto Burke Lake Rd. Go 4.7 mi. and turn left onto Rt 123 (Ox Rd). Turn left at second traffic light (big park signs), and turn left immediately after the entrance booth. Park in the first lot on the right (by the mini-golf course).

Daniels Run Park (4/30) 3622 Old Post Rd, Fairfax 22031 From I-495, take US 50 west 2.7 mi. to Fairfax Circle. Exit the circle southwest on Old Lee Hwy. In 1.2 mi. turn left on Old Post Rd (just past Historic Blenheim on the right). Drive 1 1/2 blocks to the end of the street. We have walk-day permission to park in the Country Club Hills pool parking lot.

Dyke Marsh (2/25, 3/1, 3/18, 4/5, 5/3) 6401 George Washington Memorial Pkwy, Alexandria 22307 (Belle Haven Park and Marina) From Alexandria, take George Washington Pkwy south. Cross I-495; continue 1.2 mi. to Belle Haven Park entrance on the left. Meet at south parking lot.

Eakin Park (2/12, 3/26) 3401 Prosperity Ave, Fairfax 22031 From I-495, take Rt 50 west one mi. to Prosperity Ave; turn left onto Prosperity and go one mi. to parking lot on left.

Fort C F Smith (4/23) 2411 24th St N, Arlington 22207 From I-66 east, take exit 72 (Spout Run Pkwy). At traffic light, turn right on Lee Hwy. At successive traffic lights, turn left onto Spout Run Pkwy, then left onto Lorcom Ln, then right onto Fillmore St. Go one block on Fillmore, turn right onto N. 24th St (watch for speed humps), and continue to park on left. Meet in parking lot at east end of park. From Alexandria: take GW Pkwy north, take left exit onto Spout Run, then right exit onto Lorcom Ln, and follow remaining directions above.

Huntley Meadows Hike and Bike Trail (3/8, 5/2) From I-495, take Rt 1 south 0.5 mi to Rt 633 (S. King Hwy). Turn right (west), go 2.5 miles to park entrance and lot on left (just before Telegraph Rd).

Huntley Meadows Park (4/4) 3701 Lockheed Blvd, Alexandria 22306 From I-495, take Rt 1 south 3 mi. to Lockheed Blvd. Right on Lockheed; go 0.5 mi. to Harrison Ln, park entrance on left. Meet in parking lot.

Leesylvania State Park (3/21, 4/25) 2001 Daniel K Ludwig Dr, Woodbridge 22191 From I-495, take I-95 south about 14 mi. to exit 156 (Dale City/Rippon Landing/Rt 784). Following the posted highway signs for Leesylvania State Park, exit east on Rt

A Day of CB Counting, from p. 3

on Thoroughfare Road. Here we found the bird of the day. It was a Lincoln's Sparrow, an uncommon migrant in the fall and very rare in the winter. In fact this turned out to be the first Lincoln's ever in the history of The Plains count. This bird also gave us ten sparrow species for the day. We also birded Bull, Run Mountain where we added a Winter Wren.

There are always odd misses during a long day of birding. It was almost embarrassing that we had not seen a Great Blue Heron all day. Fortunately, there was one in a pond at Silver Lake when we went back to get our cars. This was bird number 59 for the day. We finished the day at the Tally Rally at Airlie where we met with other birders and enjoyed some chili. Dave Larson and Candice Lowther birded another part of the sector and added four other species giving us a grand total of 63.

—Larry Meade



American Bittern at Dyke Marsh during CBC week. Photo by Larry Meade

Directions

784. Proceed eastward 1.1 mi. to Rt 1. Turn right (south) on Rt 1 and go 0.9 mi. to Neabsco Rd. Immediately past the Wawa service station, turn left (east) on Neabsco Rd and proceed 2 mi. to park entrance on right. After passing through the park entrance gate, go 2.2 mi. to end of paved road and park in "Picnic Area" parking lot, immediately before turn-around circle at fishing pier. State fee area.

Long Branch Nature Area (3/4, 4/1, 5/6) 625 S Carlin Springs Rd, Arlington 22204 Take Rt 50, east from Fairfax or west from Rosslyn to Carlin Springs exit. Go south on Carlin Springs 0.5 mi. to Nature Center on left, just south of N. Va Community Hospital on left. Meet at Nature Center parking lot.

Mason Neck State Park (2/21) 7301 High Point Rd, Lorton 22079 From I-495, take I-95 south 7 mi. to Lorton exit. Left on Rt 642 to Rt 1. Right on Rt 1 to Rt 242 (Gunston Rd). Left on Rt 242, go 4 mi. to

Book Notes

- Fans of David Allen Sibley's illustrations will appreciate the new completely revised second edition of *The Sibley Guide to Birds* (2014). This landmark guide includes 600 new paintings, the addition of 111 rare species and new information on habitat and behavior; along with tips on finding species in the field. 599 pages plus an introduction.
- "Bird behavior offers a mirror in which we can reflect on human behavior," writes ornithologist Noah Strycker in *The Thing with Feathers: The surprising lives of birds and what they reveal about being human* (2014). He gives the example of nutcrackers who may retrieve seeds from as many as 5,000 caches over one winter. Magpies share the ability to recognize their mirror image with humans, great apes, elephants, dolphins and orcas. A delightful examination of our feathered friends which should end the use of "bird brain" as an epithet.
- In *The Homing Instinct: Meaning & Mystery in Animal Migration*, (2014) Brend Heinrich ponders the relationship between habitat, homing and our human sense of place. He elaborates on the astonishing ability shared by birds, butterflies, beetles and fish to find their preferred winter and summer habitats over thousands of miles even when they are blown off course by weather conditions (or deliberately displaced by experimenters who capture them and then release them in strange locations). It has been shown that migrating birds can map their location by orienting to the earth's magnetic fields, taking clues from the polarization of light and recognizing their location by visible land marks. An experiment placing caged birds in a planetarium demonstrated how an Indigo Bunting was able to orient to star patterns near the North Star.
- The Hunt for the Golden Mole* (2014) by Richard Girling raises the question of the need to achieve a balance between a narrow focus on protection of endangered species and the broader question of ecological balance. In the process he has a good story to tell about how "an entire species 'known only from a partially completed specimen in an owl-pellet'," found its place on the list of endangered species.

—Carol and Chris White

Mason Neck Management Area. Turn right, follow paved road to end at Visitor Center. State fee area.

Occoquan Bay National Wildlife Refuge (3/28) 13950 Dawson Beach Rd, Woodbridge 22192 From I-495, take I-95 south 9 mi. to (left) exit 161 (Woodbridge). Go south on Rt 1 about 2 mi. to left turn onto Dawson Beach Rd. Continue on Dawson Beach 0.7 mi. to entrance gate. Meet in parking lot. US fee area.

Riverbend Park (Visitor Center) (3/7) 8700 Potomac Hills St, Great Falls 22066 From I-495, take Rt 193 west 5 mi. to Rt 603 (Riverbend Rd). Right onto Rt 603, go 2 mi. to Jeffery Rd. Right onto Jeffery; go 0.8 mi. to mail park entrance sign on right. Turn right and continue 0.5 mi to Visitor Center parking lot. Meet in front of Visitor Center

Silver Lake Park (2/19, 4/11) 16198 Silver Lake Rd, Haymarket 20169 From I-495, take I-66 west 24 miles to exit 40 (Rt 15). Turn south onto Rt 15 (toward Haymarket) and go 0.3 miles to Rt 55. Turn right onto Rt 55 and go 0.9 miles to Antioch Rd. Turn right onto Antioch and go 1.3 miles to Silver Lake Rd. Turn right and proceed to park entrance and continue to parking lot next to the lake. Meet in parking lot.

Trillium Trail - G. Richard Thompson Wildlife Management Area (5/9) (Fauquier Co) From I-495, take I-66 west 51 mi. to Linden exit (Rt 79). Go left (south) from exit ramp on Rt 79 approx. 1000 ft. to Rt 55. Turn left (east) onto Rt 55; go 1.2 mi. to Rt 638 (Freezeland Rd).

Turn left (north) onto Rt 638. Follow Rt 638, as it bears right, 5.3 mi. to Trillium Trail Parking Area on right—look for sign on kiosk. (Parking Area is just before radio towers.) Note: participants must have access permit issued by VA Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, www.dgif.virginia.gov, 1-866-721-6911.

Walker Nature Center (4/15) 11450 Glade Dr, Reston 20191. From I-66 west, take exit 60 to Rt 123 toward Vienna, continue 0.7 mi., turn left onto Rt 674, Hunter Mill Rd, go 2.8 mi and turn left onto Rt 673 Lawyers Rd. Turn right onto Twin Branches Rd for 0.3 mi. and turn left onto Glade Dr. Continue 1.1 mi. to Nature Center parking lot on right.

Trip Leaders

Dave Boltz	703-768-7499
Steve Bruck	703-425-8584
Larry Cartwright	703-941-3142
Elizabeth Fenton	703-533-0851
Catherine Kubo	703-352-1238
David Ledwith	703-933-9477
Larry Meade	703-206-9030
Elton Morel	703-553-4860
Bryan Peters	413-320-8866
Marc Ribaud	703-680-1134
Rich Rieger	703-969-0451
Ruth Schrott	703-860-1643
Phil Silas	703-590-7286
Dixie Sommers	703-969-7931
Jean Tatalias	571-447-7977
Joanna Taylor	703-243-5989

Yellow Rails and Rice Festival, 2014



On October 29 my wife, Lynnette, Kurt Gaskill, and I drove from New Orleans to Jennings, LA to attend the 6th Yellow Rails and Rice Festival. The festival is centered on the extraordinary opportunity to get good looks at many yellow rails as they are flushed from rice fields during normal harvesting operations. However, the festival is much more than that. Located in the rice harvesting region around Thornwell, about 20 minutes south of Jennings, the surrounding area is rich in birds and within easy driving distance of diverse habitats such as the Gulf Coast, freshwater bayous, and piney woods. One has the opportunity to see many birds over the course of the five day festival, either on your own or by partaking in the organized field trips.

Rice harvesting started late Thursday morning, after the dew had dried and an orientation meeting. The rice is harvested with a large combine. Three observers can ride along, one in the cab with the driver and two on a platform over the rotary thresher. One therefore has a great view of whatever pops up as the machine makes its way around the field, although the ride is noisy and at times dusty (face masks and ear plugs highly recommended, and provided in your goody bag). People not riding can also get good views from ground level. Riders are switched out after each pass around the field. The fields run from muddy to dry. If one is in good shape and the field is not too muddy you can trot alongside the combine, which travels at about four mph. Otherwise, simply watching the front of the machine as it moves along offers good looks as long as it is not too far off. Four species of rail are likely: Yellow, Sora, Virginia, and King. We all received pamphlets with tips on identifying rails in flight.

The first field harvested was a good one and Yellow Rails started popping up right away. The first pass resulted in about 20 “flushes”. How many rails this represented is unclear, as some rails are flushed multiple times. Nevertheless, this field (about five acres) was estimated to contain 100 yellow rails. I was fortunate to get a ride in the first field, and saw 17 Yellows and maybe 5 Soras on my pass. The next three fields harvested the first day held 10 to 20 Yellows each. For those on the ground, some of the Yellows flew for long distances and afforded excellent views. We also got to ride in an ATV that paced the combine, giving us a great opportunity to watch birds all around the field.

Harvesting continued on Friday and Saturday. These fields did not contain as many Yellow Rails, but they all produced.

Several rails were captured with mist nets and affixed with tiny radio transmitters (we did not witness this).

Rails aren't the only birds in the fields. The number of Savannah Sparrows in rice country is astonishing. The fields also contained both Sedge and Marsh Wrens, as well as the occasional Vesper, Grasshopper, Nelson's, and Le Conte's sparrows, Wilson's Snipe and Dickcissel. On Friday morning Kurt, Lynnette, and I revisited the last field harvested the day before to explore the weedy edges of the dikes to look for sparrows that had been flushed during harvesting. Sure enough, we found both Dickcissel and Le Conte's. One Le Conte's responded to pishing and perched up on a stalk in full sun, offering a fantastic view.

As I mentioned, this part of Louisiana is rich in birds. One of my targets was Sprague's Pipit. At daybreak Wednesday morning before harvesting we patrolled one of the grass airstrips that line some of the farm roads in the area. We lucked out as a Sprague's flew low overhead, calling. We were also treated to a tremendous waterfowl show, as flock after flock of Greater White-fronted Geese passed overhead, a scene repeated at dusk. A few contained Snow and Ross's Geese. Also in abundance were both White and “dark” Ibises. Most of the dark ibis were White-faced, but there are enough glossies around to prevent a positive id unless the eye color can be ascertained. The area is also patrolled by many raptors. Northern Harrier,

American Kestrel, Red-tailed Hawk, and Loggerhead Shrike are all common, and we also saw Swainson's, Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawks, and Merlin around the rice fields. Other birds noted around Thornwell included White Pelican, Roseate Spoonbill, Common Ground-dove, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, Vermilion Flycatcher, Say's Phoebe, American Pipit, and Clay-colored Sparrow.

Visits to other habitats were always rewarding. A highlight was Cameron Prairie National Wildlife Refuge on the way to Cameron and the Gulf. We drove the wildlife drive around freshwater pools

and marshes and were treated to flocks of Fulvous Whistling-Ducks, the pinkest Spoonbills I have ever seen, a pair of Crested Caracaras, lots of dabbling ducks (including Mottled Ducks), American Coots, Common Gallinules, herons, ibis (close enough to see eye color and pick out both Glossy and White-faced), shorebirds, Neotropic Cormorants and alligators. On the beach at Cameron we viewed both Snowy and Piping

Plovers, Marbled Godwits, Long-billed Curlews, and other shorebirds.

All in all a wonderful experience, with 127 species tallied by me. The festival is well organized, with a fun jambalaya dinner complete with sweet dough pies and a Cajun band, and a final night reception offering samples of other Cajun cuisine such as crawfish, alligator, and boudin. This is definitely a festival I will attend again.

—Marc Ribaud



Yellow Rail in flight



Photographs of birders and harvesters in the fields and Yellow Rail by Donna L. Dittmann

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JOIN THE NORTHERN VIRGINIA BIRD CLUB

Northern Virginia Bird Club dues for 2015 are \$8 for Individual and \$12 for Family Membership. Members receive our quarterly newsletter, *The Siskin*. Checks for dues should be sent to Northern Virginia Bird Club, Attn: Membership, P.O. Box 5812, Arlington, VA 22205-0812. Or join or renew online at the club's web site.

If you miss an issue of *The Siskin* or need to report an address or ZIP Code change, please send an email message to nvabc@verizon.net or leave a message for Charlotte Friend at 703-532-0207.

Please note: NVBC does not exchange, give away, or sell its membership lists.

NVBC ON THE WEB

Current information and special notices about NVBC meetings, field trips, and other activities, along with a printable membership form, are posted on the club's website, www.nvabc.org.

If you have information or pictures you would like to see on the website, please email the webmaster, Len Alfredson, at nvabc@verizon.net.

NVBC eMail Exchange

By participating in the club's email exchange, you can get email notices of late updates to *The Siskin* and the field trip schedule. To join the exchange, send an email to nvabc@verizon.net. Put "EXCHANGE" in the subject field and

your full name in the message area. You will receive a response from nvbc-exchange@googlegroups.com. The list is for NVBC members' use only.

General Meeting Dates: February 18 and April 22, 2015.

Next Board Meeting: Wednesday, March 4, 2015, 7:30 pm, at Diane Marton's home. All club members are welcome at board meetings. For directions or to have items put on the agenda, please call or email Diane Marton.

Thanks to the mailing crew: Many thanks to the November mail out crew: Sally Carson, Elizabeth Fenton, Charlotte Friend, Jane Crowe and Joanna Taylor.

Deadline for next issue of *The Siskin*: The May issue will include activities through June 2015. Please send items for publication by **March 15, 2015** to the editors at siskineditor@verizon.net.



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Photo by Larry Meade of Eastern Towhee in Luria Park, Fairfax County taken during CBC week