

Guilford County's Best Birds of 2015

Submitted by George Wheaton

The year just ended was characterized by a colder than normal winter and a lot of rain throughout the year. In spite of the cold in the Piedmont and farther north, winter finches were not numerous. The heavy rains in late summer and early fall reduced shorebird habitat at favorite sites. Nevertheless, the year turned out to be an exciting one and produced a number of candidates for "Best Bird of the Year."

Table I lists candidates for 2015's best bird of the year, organized as usual by the date on which each was first reported. In this context, "best bird" generally means scarcest or most unusual. Twenty-two candidates are listed. Ten species, for which there are five or fewer reports from Guilford County, are highlighted below. Two others – Little Blue Heron and Mississippi Kite – are singled out for honorable mention. As shown in Table I, at least one candidate was reported in every month! Persistent birding by some of our more obsessive types produced this nice outcome – a first since we began proposing candidates several years ago.

Sandhill Crane (5th report) – On January 8, Lou Skrabec and George Wheaton found three members of this species in the marsh bordering the cove at Doggett Road East. The birds stayed until January 14. Birders had mixed luck getting good views of these birds. They were distant and preferred to stay within a belt of small water-side saplings. This is the fifth report for the County.

Common Tern (5th report) – Henry Link came across this bird while birding at the Lake Brandt Marina on October 11. Andrew Thornton relocated the bird on the following day. The dark wing bar on the perched bird was diagnostic. This is the first fall report for this species. The previous sightings occurred in spring (2) and summer (2).

Lesser Black-backed Gull (4th report) – Armed with his "superscope," Henry Link reported two adult birds of this species on February 3 as he surveyed waterfowl from the Yanceyville Causeway at Lake Townsend. He relocated one adult bird on Lake Townsend from the Doggett Road West overlook on February 11. A month later, on March 14, Andrew Thornton located two "first cycle" birds on Lake Townsend from the North Church Street Causeway. This species was first reported for Guilford County in 2010. Thus far, all six sightings have been from Lake Townsend.

Ross's Goose (4th report) - On December 1, a professor of English at Guilford College photographed this bird as it hung out with a flock of Canada Geese on the school's campus. He sent the picture to Lynn Moseley, who alerted the birding community. Although seen by



Photo Credit – Andrew Thornton

several birders including Lynn, the Links, Amy Hanson and others, the bird and its attendant Canadas proved elusive, visiting a variety of locations on and off campus. The bird stayed through exams and was last seen on December 12, a week before the annual Christmas Bird Count.

Greater White-fronted Goose (3rd report) – On April 20, Nate Swick found this unusual (for us) bird accompanying a small flock of Canada Geese near the pitch-and-putt golf course at Bur-mil Park. Ron Morris, Henry Link, George Wheaton and others saw the bird through the 24th when it departed. This sighting is only the third for Guilford County and is the first since 2007.

Baird's Sandpiper (3rd report) – Two juvenile birds were found by the Links below the Lake Jeanette spillway on August 29. The birds lingered for a week and were last reported on September 7. During this same period a third juvenile arrived on the scene, preferring the mudflats at the upper Yanceyville Causeway. The two previous reports of this species were in 1966 and 1967!



Photo Credit – Lou Skrabec

American White Pelican (2nd report) – Nate Swick was out birding on March 31st when he dropped by the Lake Higgins Marina. Careful scanning of this under-birded location revealed a single American White Pelican, only the second report for Guilford County. Nate quickly got the word out and Henry Link, Lou Skrabec, and a few other lucky birders arrived on the scene to gaze at this rare visitor. As birds often do, however, this one flew off after too short a stay. Fortunately, Lou, George Wheaton and others relocated the bird on the Lake Brandt cove just west of highway US 220. Other birders managed to see it at this second location before it departed for good. (For those interested in such matters, there have been five sightings of Brown Pelican in the County.)

Sedge Wren (2nd report) – Nate Swick struck again on October 28. While birding along Baldwin Road in the eastern part of the County (near the Dickcissel site) he came across a pair of handsome Sedge Wrens. Once again, he got the word out quickly and enabled Henry Link, Andrew Thornton, Melissa Whitmire, George Wheaton, and others to get fantastic looks at these birds as they slowly moved along the road shoulder. Seldom have Sedge Wrens been so nicely seen and photographed at point blank range! The only prior report for this species occurred on the Christmas Bird Count of December, 1963.

White-faced Ibis (1st report) – On April 4, Marty Wall came down from his perch up in Rockingham County to squeeze in a couple of hours of birding before reporting to work. Given limited time, he decided to hike in on the Nat Greene Trail to check out the Horsepen Creek mudflats. Once there he located what appeared to be a dull, dark-colored ibis. Glossy

Ibis didn't seem quite right nor did immature White Ibis (too light for this bird and too early in the season for post-breeding dispersal) so he conservatively identified it as a dull dark ibis. He then alerted Henry Link and headed for work. Henry arrived on the scene with Matt Wangerin and George Wheaton. A scope, which Marty wasn't carrying, revealed the bird's diagnostic red eyes, which were clearly seen and duly photographed. This bird was a first County sighting and the only inland record for North Carolina. Indeed, it has only been reported from four other counties, all of which abut salt water.

Franklin's Gull (1st report) – Andrew Thornton struck pay dirt on October 13. Having monitored various birding reports from around the state and learning that Franklin's Gulls were being reported west of us, he decided to check out some of our own lakes. Standing on the Doggett Road East overlook and looking out over Lake Townsend he saw two gulls – a Ring-billed Gull and his hoped-for Franklin's Gull. A quick phone call brought Henry Link, Lou Skrabec and others to the scene. After a short stay, the bird flew off in the direction of the marina and dam. Lou gave chase and relocated the bird just before it, and a Herring Gull with which it was consorting, flew over the dam and out of sight. Andrew's prior experience with this gull enabled him to separate it from Laughing Gull, with which it is sometimes confused.

Honorable Mentions:

Little Blue Heron – Although this species is uncommon in Guilford County, it does occur in small numbers most years as a post-breeding visitor. However, "Little Blues" were remarkable this summer. From mid-July through early August, the Links surveyed the shorelines of Guilford County's reservoirs. On the 25th of July, they tallied an astounding 33 immature birds as well as one adult. This impressive gathering continued for at least two more weeks.

Mississippi Kite – Mississippi Kites also are uncommon in Guilford County. The first report we have of them nesting in our area was in 2004, but small numbers have been present at locations off Friendly Avenue every year since. On July 5, the Links and Scott DePue canvassed areas around Pebble and Tallwood Roads. They tallied an amazing 19 adult/subadult birds and five nestlings. It will be interesting to determine how many are present in 2016!



Photo Credit Ann Van Sant

Given the birds described above and other worthy candidates listed in Table I, which are your candidates for 2015's Bird-of-the-Year? I have to go with the White-faced Ibis and the Franklin's Gull. Interestingly, neither of these was among a dozen or so birds that a large

panel of PBC birders recently predicted would be the next newcomers to show up in the County.

Parenthetically, as of December, 2015, the Carolina Bird Club indicates that Guilford County has recorded 308 species. This is the eighth largest list among North Carolina's 100 counties, and is second best (trailing only Wake) in North Carolina's Piedmont. "Keep your eyes to the skies!"

Table 1. Candidates for Bird of the Year - 2015

Species	Date Reported	Location
Snow Goose	1/2/15	River Ridge Road
Sandhill Crane	1/8/15	Doggett Road East
Lesser Black-backed Gull	2/3/15	Lake Townsend
American White Pelican	3/31/15	Lake Higgins
White-faced Ibis	4/4/15	Horsepen Creek flats
Greater White-fronted Goose	4/20/15	Bur-Mil Park
Warbling Vireo	5/10/15	PTI Marriott pond
Dickcissel	5/26/15	Baldwin Road
Black-crowned Night-Heron	6/29/15	Horsepen Creek flats
Mississippi Kite	7/5/15	N of Friendly Ave.
Snowy Egret	7/17/15	Flats west of US 220
Little Blue Heron	7/25/15	Greensboro area
Baird's Sandpiper	8/29/15	Lake Jeanette spill.
Marsh Wren	9/15/15	Horsepen Creek flats
Sora	9/15/15	Horsepen Creek flats
Common Tern	10/11/15	Lake Brandt Marina
Franklin's Gull	10/13/15	Lake Townsend
Sedge Wren	10/28/15	Baldwin Road
Surf Scoter	11/24/15	Lake Townsend
Merlin	12/2/15	River Ridge Road
Ross's Goose	12/1/15	Guilford College
Black Scoter	12/3/15	Lake Brandt Marina

