

Guilford County's Best Birds – 2017

We have wrapped up another year of birding and once again Guilford County hosted some memorable birds. Many of these were only here for a brief visit. Others, like our long-staying Anhinga and Great Cormorant, settled in to enjoy what our area has to offer. Memorable birds in this report are those that are relatively unusual. An arbitrary criterion was used to determine how unusual a reported bird was. Birds that over many years have been reported on 10 or fewer occasions were deemed “unusual.”

Species meeting the criterion are listed in Table 1. They are introduced in the order in which they were reported. A respectable 18 species met the criterion, two better than last year. It is interesting to note that the year got off to a relatively slow start. Only four candidates for “Bird of the Year” were reported during the winter months and only three more were added in the spring. But August ushered in a fall-out of uncommon birds that continued into late fall. It should be noted that three unusual species (Ross’s Goose, Red-necked Phalarope, and Yellow-bellied Flycatcher) were reported at least twice during the year at different times and places.

Rather than discussing the entire slate of candidates shown in Table 1, we have narrowed the field to those species that historically have been reported five or fewer times. Nine birds met this more stringent criterion. The circumstances of each report are summarized below. Two honorable mentions are also included.

LEADING CANDIDATES

Great Cormorant (5th Report) - On November 29, Henry Link located a single Great Cormorant resting and fishing with a number of its smaller Double-crested cousins. The bird set up its temporary home in the cove of Lake Townsend at the Doggett Road east causeway. It remained in that area through at least December 16 when it was tallied on our Christmas Bird Count. Many observers were able to tick this bird during its two-week stay. This species was last reported in January of 2009.

Glossy Ibis (5th Report) – Matt Wangerin went prospecting farther afield and on September 12 was rewarded with a Glossy Ibis. The bird was hanging out on the Hamburg flats, located on the portion of Lake Brandt that extends west of US 220. This individual, which represented Guilford County’s fifth report, was an immature bird. This species, which is less frequently seen than its White Ibis cousin, was last reported in July of 2009.

Willet (4th Report) – On May 5, Mike Conway was birding at the Lake Townsend marina. There he found and photographed a Willet. The last two sightings of this species have occurred at the Horsepen Creek mud flats. Three Willets were found there in 2016. Two reports of this species have occurred in springtime and two have been made in August.

Anhinga (3rd Report) – The third report of an Anhinga in Guilford County was filed by Andrew Thornton on August 24. This bird took up residence in the same cove that later hosted the Great Cormorant, and stayed in that location until mid-October. Its prolonged visit allowed many birders to tick it. Photographs showed the bird to be in female/immature plumage. The species was last reported in August of 2008.

Piping Plover (3rd Report) – On August 2, Andrew Thornton scored again, finding Guilford County’s third

Piping Plover. This bird had a lot in common with the Piping Plover found in 2013. Both occurred in early August and both were reported from the Horsepen Creek mud flats. Furthermore, both had been banded. Thanks to the efforts of Nate Swick we have learned the following about this year's bird: It hatched earlier this year at Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore near Sleeping Bear Point on Lake Michigan. This location is only 10 miles from North Manitou Island where the 2013 bird was hatched. I don't know about you, but I know where I am going to be birding during the first week of August!

Swainson's Warbler (3rd Report) – On August 31, Andrew Thornton scored yet again. This time he shifted his focus to the eastern part of the county where he birded at Bryan Park in the area of the picnic shelters. His efforts were rewarded with the third record of Swainson's Warbler in Guilford County. He also managed to obtain some good photographs of this notoriously difficult-to-see bird. Given several other good birds reported from the area around Bryan Park, it may be a good idea to spend more time there. Swainson's Warbler was last reported in April of 2004.

Yellow-bellied Flycatcher (3rd and 4th Reports) – Andrew Thornton did it again in mid-September when he came up with Guilford County's third and fourth reports of Yellow-bellied Flycatcher. The first, on September 9, was found and photographed along the Highwoods Trail and Collection Pond at Price Park. He found the second bird five days later along Howerton Road in the eastern part of the county. The previous report also came from mid-September, but in 1995.

Snowy Owl (2nd Report) – Many years ago, the occurrence of this most beautiful of the North American owls was summarized as follows: "Occasionally wanders down from the north in January or February. Last reported in 1950." In the intervening 67 years we have learned a lot about why these birds sometimes wander south. These "irruptions" are periodic, they are related to food supplies or the lack thereof, and they often involve young birds. Therefore, it was not completely surprising that 2017, an "irruptive" year, should produce Guilford County's second report of this species. Any disappointment simply stems from the fact that none of the Piedmont Bird Club's avid birders got to see this bird.

The bird was reported as follows: "Yesterday (12/14/17) my daughter Faith Wilhoit and her flight instructor of Bethany Aviation saw a Snowy Owl at PT airport at 4:30 p.m., Kilo 5 and Kilo 6 runway." The bird was captured by USF&WS personnel and taken to Raptor Med at the Carolina Raptor Center for rehabilitation. The bird appeared emaciated and was infested with feather lice. The owl is still at the Raptor Center as of 12/28/17 and is in good health. So far during its stay it has scarfed down 28 brown rats and squirrels. We all wish it an eventual safe return to the north. The owl made it onto the Count Week portion of the Greensboro Christmas Bird Count!

Sabine's Gull (1st Report) – Henry Link was out birding the lakes on September 15 when he encountered two interesting small gulls on Lake Townsend from the south Church Street causeway looking to the east. He checked his identification and then began phoning birders saying in a somewhat shaky voice, "I have hit a big one – Sabine's Gulls – get over here ASAP." Not needing any further encouragement, several birders did so and were rewarded with excellent views and photographs of two first-year birds. They were seen both on the water and in flight. When flying, the beautiful, bold, black, white, and brown pattern on the upper wing was clearly visible. These gulls of the high Arctic, which normally migrate far offshore, may have been influenced on their south-bound trip by Tropical Depression Irma.

HONORABLE MENTIONS

Great White Heron (4th Report) – Henry Link found this heron on May 25. It was hanging out at the Horsepen Creek mud flats. This bird is a color morph of the Great Blue Heron and, therefore, is the same species as the Great Blue. Our last one was found in August of 2013 and stayed until the middle of October, preferring the Buffalo Creek watershed in downtown Greensboro.

Rough-legged Hawk (4th Report) – Our second “honorable mention” goes to a Rough-legged Hawk that was seen on December 22, 2016 by John Wright, but not reported until early 2017. The bird was seen near Thomasville, in the vicinity of the intersection of the J. M. Hunt Freeway and I-40. This species was last reported in Guilford County on the day after Christmas, 1995.

AND THE WINNER IS...

This year the “Bird of the Year” honor must be shared to avoid any unseemly controversy. In my mind there are two especially well-qualified contenders: Snowy Owl and Sabine’s Gull. These candidates have several things in common: Both are birds that spend much of their time in the high Arctic. Both are very uncommon in Guilford County, representing the first or second report in the county over a span of many years. And both are strikingly beautiful. I think the Sabine’s Gull is the most beautiful of North America’s gull species. (Okay, I can also hear those who are supporting Ivory and Heermann’s Gulls). And the Snowy Owl is, as one fan recently stated, “simply gorgeous.”

I wonder what treasures await us in 2018. Let’s go birding and find out!

George Wheaton

TABLE 1
CANDIDATES FOR 2017 BIRD OF THE YEAR

SPECIES	DATE FIRST REPORTED	LOCATION
Ross’s Goose	1/29/2017	Howerton Road pond
Rufous Hummingbird	2/3/2017	Brown’s Summit
Lesser Black-backed Gull	2/13/2017	Lake Townsend
Sandhill Crane	2/14/2017	Spearman Rd. & Rte. 150
Chuck-will’s-widow	4/30/2017	Beulah Church Road
Willet	5/5/2017	Lake Townsend marina
Red-necked Phalarope	5/21/2017	Osii Court & Penny Road
Piping Plover	8/2/2017	Horsepen Creek mud flats
Short-billed Dowitcher	8/3/2017	Horsepen Creek mud flats

American Avocet	8/6/2017	Plainfield Marsh mud flats
Anhinga	8/24/2017	Doggett Rd. East, cove
Swainson's Warbler	8/31/2017	Bryan Park picnic shelters
Yellow-bellied Flycatcher	9/9/2017	Price Park Highwoods Trail
Glossy Ibis	9/12/2017	Hamburg Flats, Lake Brandt
Sabine's Gull	9/15/2017	Lake Townsend, Church St.
Sedge Wren	9/19/2017	Howerton Road field
Great Cormorant	11/29/2017	Doggett Rd. East, cove
Snowy Owl	12/14/2017	PTI Airport runways