

Guilford County's Best Birds – 2022

From a birder's perspective, 2022 was highly rewarding. For the most part, the weather was pleasant for both birds and birders – most hot days were not too hot and cold days were not too cold. There was plenty of rain but not so much as to inundate Lake Brandt's mudflats and make them unattractive to migrating shorebirds. Hurricanes were not an issue. But those tropical systems that did develop followed tracks that normally do not push storm-driven birds into Guilford County. Birders who beat the bushes throughout the year were rewarded with some very nice birds. But, although nearly two dozen were deemed "unusual," there were no firsts for the county. (The exception being the redoubtable Say's Phoebe found in 2021 that continued with us throughout much of 2022.)

It is against this backdrop that we entertain candidates for "best bird of the year." The candidates are those birds that have been judged to be "unusual." Unusual species are arbitrarily defined as those that have been reported ten or fewer times over many decades. In 2022, 22 birds (out of 235 species reported to ebird) met this criterion. These candidates are listed in Table I together with the date they were first reported, and the location where they were first found. Birds are listed chronologically in the order they were reported. Fourteen of the 22 have been reported five or fewer times.

TABLE I
CANDIDATES FOR 2022 BIRD OF THE YEAR

SPECIES	DATE FIRST REPORTED	LOCATION
Clay-colored Sparrow*	1/25	Howerton Rd. ponds
Great Cormorant	2/5	Lake Townsend power pole
Iceland/Thayer's Gull*	2/6	Horsepen Creek flats
Western Tanager*	2/13	Westridge Heights feeder
Say's Phoebe*	3/26	Howerton Rd. County Farm
Rough-legged Hawk*	3/28	Old Reidsville Rd., N of NC 150
Anhinga	4/22	High Point City Lake
Brown Pelican	5/3	Lake Townsend marina
Roseate Spoonbill*	7/5	Lake Townsend, Church St.
Willet*	7/10	Palmetto Trail, Lake Brandt
Swallow-tailed Kite*	8/26	Howerton Rd. County Farm
Olive-sided Flycatcher*	9/1	Price Park Highwoods Trail
Glossy Ibis	9/1	Palmetto Trail, Lake Brandt
Golden-winged Warbler	9/4	Price Park Highwoods Trail
Olive-sided Flycatcher*	9/14	Nat Greene Trail, Lake Brandt
American Avocet	9/22	Nat Greene Trail, Lake Brandt
Least Bittern*	9/24	Howerton Rd. pond
"Lawrence's" Warbler*	9/24	Howerton Rd.
Royal Tern*	10/1	Oak Hollow Lake, North Overlook
Black Scoter	10/28	Lake Townsend marina
Pacific Loon*	12/1	Yanceyville causeway, Townsend
Sandhill Crane	12/17	Lake Herman, in flight

- Birds with an asterisk have been reported five or fewer times. They are discussed below.

LEADING CANDIDATES

Rough-legged Hawk (5th Report) – The first report of Rough-legged Hawk in Guilford County occurred in January of 1978. In the nearly 45 years since, there have been only four additional reports. Most are frustratingly short on details, are provided by a single observer, and lack confirming photographs. The latest report comes from Jeffrey Turner who spotted his bird in a field along Old Reidsville Road, north of NC 150. The bird was observed for roughly 30 seconds, from a distance of 300 yards. For most of this time the bird was hovering/kiting. Jeffrey provided details of important field marks and gave arguments as to why the bird was not a Red-tailed Hawk. He searched for the bird on the following day but was unable to relocate it.

Roseate Spoonbill (5th Report) – The first report of this species occurred in July of 2009. The most recent report was filed by Christian Thoma and, independently, by Amy Hanson on July 5th. Both reports came from the shores of Lake Townsend, and both probably involved the same bird. Amy reported one and Christian had one, which was in the company of a Great Egret. One Roseate Spoonbill, probably the individual first reported, was seen by many observers at several locations through July and until August 21st.

Willet (5th Report) – Willet was a county first back in April of 1995. This fifth report was filed by Matt Wangerin on July 10th when he found an impressive flock of five birds on Lake Brandt's Horsepen Creek mudflats. Many birders descended on the area later in the day but were only able to find a single member of the wandering quintet.

Olive-sided Flycatcher (4th and 5th Reports) – This species apparently is more frequently reported from areas just west of Guilford County. Our first three reports occurred in the early 1990s. Throughout the intervening 30 years, birders have been searching through the tips of dead tree snags in hopes of finding this large flycatcher, which sports a dark vest and occasionally may show white tufts on the sides of its rump. Henry Link provided the fourth report for this species on September 1st. Henry found his bird in Price Park. What may have been another and different bird was reported two weeks later at the start of the Nat Greene Trail. This bird was located by Chris Bame, Heather Buttonow, and James Preztsch. Photographs revealed the distinctive white tufts on the bird's rump. The moral of this story is to keep checking those tree snags during spring and fall migration.

Least Bittern (5th Report) – Early on the morning of September 24th, Andrew Thornton was birding at the northern pond along Howerton Road. To his delight, he clearly heard the low soft call of a Least Bittern. The bird called three times. The calls came from the same general area of thick grasses and brush that hosted a Virginia Rail in the previous three years. What a way to start your morning!

Clay-colored Sparrow (4th Report) – Joe Donohue found this bird along Howerton Road on January 25th. It was spotted in the same general area as the Least Bittern discussed above. Distinguishing this species from a Chipping Sparrow, when both are in winter plumage, is a very difficult task. Joe based his identification primarily on the color of the bird's lores. It is pale in Clay-colored Sparrow and dark in Chipping Sparrow. Joe's bird had pale lores. Unfortunately, Joe was unable to take photos to confirm the bird's identity.

Swallow-tailed Kite (3rd Report) – A wonderful surprise awaited Sally Siko who was birding along Howerton Road on the morning of August 26th. It was she and her bright eyes that spotted this graceful raptor coursing over the adjacent soybean fields. As luck would have it, the Piedmont Bird Club had a scheduled field trip to this site the following morning and many members on that trip were able to "tick" this beautiful bird of prey. The first two reports for this species occurred in June of 1996 and July of 2012.

Royal Tern (3rd Report) – Another highly unusual bird was reported on October 1st from Oak Hollow Lake by Matt Wangerin and Paul and Lisa Sumner. It was a single Royal Tern. The previous reports of this species came on the heels of Hurricane Irene (2011) and Tropical Storm Florence (2018). Why this one showed up when it did is any birder's guess and known only to the bird itself.

Iceland/Thayer's Gull (2nd Report) – Years ago when the White Street Landfill was in full swing and processing a lot of garbage, there were more gulls than there are today. Among them were some real treasures, like Glaucous Gull. Even so, there were no reports of Iceland Gull until fairly recently. The ice was broken in 2016 when the first report came in. The second report came on February 6th of 2022 when James Preztsch and Chris Bame located this bird on the Horsepen Creek mudflats. Photos were obtained that showed features consistent with Iceland Gull, but other possibilities could not be entirely ruled out. Adding to the difficulty of cementing the identification was the recent "lumping" of Thayer's Gull with Iceland Gull. This report probably is good for an Iceland Gull that has some Thayer's features. In any event this was a very unusual gull!

Western Tanager (2nd Report) – On a cold and dreary day in February when a birder doesn't want to be out in the field, what does she do? She stays home and monitors her feeders. This is precisely what Cara Michele did on February 13th. She was rewarded by the unexpected appearance of a handsome male Western Tanager that visited her feeder for four hours or so. Photos were obtained. They showed a male bird going into breeding plumage. The colors were striking: the beginnings of a reddish orange head; a yellow and a white wing bar; a black back and wing; and bright yellow underparts and rump. What a beauty! The first report of this species was in January of 2021. It too visited a feeder for a few hours.

"Lawrence's Warbler" (2nd) – This bird is a hybrid resulting from a backcross of Golden-winged and Blue-winged Warblers. It is more unusual than another hybrid known as a "Brewster's Warbler." Andrew Thornton, James Preztsch, and Chris Bame found this specimen on September 24th as they birded along Howerton Road. They documented their find with photographs.

Pacific Loon (2nd Report) – On December 1st, Matt Wangerin and several other birders were scoping Lake Townsend from the Yanceyville Street causeway. To their delight, they located not just one, but two Pacific Loons that apparently had traveled from the West Coast and were on their way to see what the Atlantic Ocean had to offer. Diagnostic photos were obtained. Our first Pacific Loon was reported in 2008. It stayed for a little over two weeks on Lake Townsend.

Say's Phoebe (1st Report) – This bird apparently likes the company of Jax and Opie (the donkey and burro) that reside at the County Farm on Howerton Road. The bird apparently is deciding whether to put down roots in their neighborhood. First reported on October 16th of 2021, this vagrant was seen by many birders off and on through April 10th, 2022. After an absence of five months, it was found again by Lou Skrabec on September 29th. It is still being reported as of mid-January, 2023. Say's Phoebe was also reported from Rockingham County and from Lake Macintosh Park in Guilford during 2022. It is highly likely that those reports involve this same individual.

Guilford County's Bird of the Year, 2022

We have an embarrassment of riches! Even though we did not receive reports of a true county first in 2022, the preceding descriptions make it clear that there are many candidates worthy of our consideration. And of course, judges may offer a variety of write-ins in addition to those we have singled out.

Personally, I can't make up my mind. How can one choose among these contenders? Does one go for agility and grace on the wing or for vibrantly colored plumage? Or how can one ignore an apparent homesteader that has journeyed from far away to make a new home here? Given this predicament, I am taking the unprecedented step (for me) of choosing two birds as Guilford County's Bird of the Year for 2022.

Let's hear it for the **Swallow-tailed Kite** and for the **Western Tanager**! What's your choice? Whatever you decide upon, here's hoping you find the bird of your dreams in 2023.