



## Guilford County and Its Rarest Birds

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For many years the Piedmont Bird Club has been tracking reports of birds encountered in Guilford County. As we approach the end of 2023, data are available for 157 species, or half of the 314 species currently reported for the county. The remaining birds, for which data have not been recorded, consist of our common, every day, backyard birds such as Song Sparrows, Northern Mockingbirds, American Robins, etc. These are the birds we would expect to see on a seasonal or even daily basis.

In each of the past several years we have prepared a brief report about the more unusual birds encountered. “Unusual birds” in this context are those that have been reported 10 or fewer times in the past 100 plus years. But what about the truly rare birds? How many species, if any, have been reported only once during that same time frame? (We should add that the focus here is on the occurrence of the bird and not on the number of reports generated by its presence; e.g., on one Say’s Phoebe and not on the dozens of related reports.) The answer is shown in TABLE 1 where one-time wonders are listed together with the date (month/year) on which each was first reported. In all, 33 birds share this distinction.

**TABLE 1**  
**GUILFORD COUNTY’S ONE-TIME WONDERS\***

<b>SPECIES</b>	<b>DATE</b>	<b>SPECIES</b>	<b>DATE</b>
Black-bellied Whistling-Duck	8/2021	Arctic Tern	5/2020
Fulvous Whistling-Duck	4/65***	Pomarine Jaeger	7/84
Eurasian Wigeon	12/91	Short-eared Owl	1/02
Harlequin Duck	2/2007	Northern Saw-whet Owl	?/74
Ruffed Grouse	5/97	Blk-chinned Hummingbird	12/2020
Western Grebe	12/2009	Broad-tailed Hummingbird	4/2002
Aechmophorus Grebe**	12/2009	Alder Flycatcher	5/58
White-faced Ibis	4/2015	Say’s Phoebe	10/2021
American Goshawk	12/82	Blk-throated Gray Warbler	2/92
Clapper Rail	8/2011	Le Conte’s Sparrow	9/56
Purple Gallinule	7/43	Sharp-tailed (Nelson’s) Sp.	9/56
Wilson’s Plover	5/64	Oregon Junco****	1/48
Black-necked Stilt	5/2014	Lapland Longspur	11/2007
Whimbrel	9/86	Lazuli Bunting	4/2013
Franklin’s Gull	10/2015	Brewer’s Blackbird	4/66
Sabine’s Gull	9/2017	White-winged Crossbill	12/63
Sooty Tern	9/2018		

Notes: \*The taxonomic order used in TABLE I has not kept up with the times.

\*\*The Aechmophorus grebe was not positively identified at the species level. Clark’s Grebe could not be ruled out, nor could a possible Clark’s x Western hybrid.

\*\*\*Entries occurring prior to the year 2000 are represented only by the last two digits of the year.

\*\*\*\*The Oregon Junco report occurred some 20 years before the Oregon Junco species was lumped with four other junco species into Dark-eyed Junco.

The earliest report in TABLE I is over 120 years old! It refers to a Short-eared Owl reported on New Year's Day 1902 by none other than T. Gilbert Pearson himself. It is surprising that this species has not been mentioned again in the 120 years since Pearson's report. Short-eared Owl is occasionally found in North Carolina's Coastal Plain but apparently is very rare at more inland sites. (Perhaps we should pay more attention in wintery late afternoons to the large fields along Howerton Road, or to other locations known to host Northern Harriers such as the borders of grassy airstrips.)

When looking at the species listed in TABLE I we also might wonder how many were correctly identified at the time they were first reported. Eleven of the entries are based on the reports of single observers or an unknown number of observers. I believe that earlier custodians of the Piedmont Bird Club's historical database accepted the validity of these entries and we have no basis for questioning them now.

It is interesting to look at the years in which the one-time wonders occurred. Only one, Pearson's owl, was reported in the first four decades of the twentieth century. The next six decades produced 16 birds, and another 16 have been recorded since the year 2000. The most recent reports include four birds (Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, Arctic Tern, Black-chinned Hummingbird, and Say's Phoebe) that visited us during 2020 and 2021. It remains to be seen what the rest of this decade will deliver and how many of our current one-time wonders will retain that status over time.

One can also consider the relationship between time of year and appearance of a one-time wonder. Toward this end let's divide the year up into seasons and slow periods: winter visits (December, January, February); slow month (March); spring migration (April, May); slow months (June, July); fall migration (August, September, October); and slow month (November). One-time wonders have appeared in every month except March and June, with only one being reported in November. Two or more birds have shown up in every other month.

What is the moral of this short story? Go birding as often as you can. If you must be away, go on your trips in March, June, or November. And remember, "Keep your eyes on the skies."