

# Guilford County's Best Birds – 2020

by PBC member George Wheaton

Once again it is time to consider, out of the thousands of reports of 225 plus bird species, which bird was the star of the show this year in Guilford County. Variables influencing reporting were much the same as last year. It was an unusually wet year. By the end of 2020 we were more than 20 inches above our average annual rainfall. Like last year, this pattern significantly reduced shorebird habitat. In turn, relatively few unusual shorebirds were reported. Also in 2020, those birders out scouring the bushes day after day continued to modify our thoughts about which birds were truly unusual. The list of candidates continued to shrink due in part to increasing knowledge about where and when to search for unusual species. Similarly, “pishing” to attract normally shy birds is giving way to use of much more sophisticated audio lures. Birds that once remained hidden to probing binoculars revealed themselves in response to Eastern Screech-Owl calls and playback of their own species’ songs and calls. Although fewer unusual birds were reported in 2020, there still were many finds that made a birder’s heart beat a bit faster.

To identify candidates for best bird of the year we applied the same methodology as used for the past nine years. We arbitrarily defined as “unusual” those species reported ten or fewer times over a period of several decades. In 2020, as in 2019, only 13 species met this criterion. These birds are listed in Table 1 together with the date on which they were reported to *eBird* or to the Piedmont Bird Club, and the location where they were first found. Birds are listed chronologically in the order they were reported. Five of these candidates have been reported five or fewer times.

TABLE 1

## CANDIDATES FOR 2020 BIRD OF THE YEAR

SPECIES	DATE FIRST REPORTED	LOCATION
Virginia Rail	1/1	Howerton Road
Horned Lark	1/1	Howerton Road
Lesser Black-backed Gull	1/17	Lake Brandt Marina
Anhinga	5/20	Hamburg Mill Flats (Brandt)
American White Pelican*	5/20	Hamburg Mill Flats (Brandt)
Arctic Tern*	5/21	Oak Hollow Lake (North)
Red-necked Phalarope	5/27	Oak Hollow Lake (North)
Glossy Ibis*	9/20	Howerton Road
Connecticut Warbler	9/20	Bicentennial Greenway
Yellow-bellied Flycatcher	10/1	Howerton Road
Jaeger (Sp.)*	10/2	Mabel Lane
Rufous Hummingbird	12/3	Farmgate Road
Black-chinned Hummingbird*	12/12	Pleasant Garden

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

## LEADING CANDIDATES

**Glossy Ibis** (5<sup>th</sup> Report) – On the 20<sup>th</sup> of September, Rhonda Weiss was birding along Howerton Road in the vicinity of the ponds when her bright eyes settled upon a large wader. The bird turned out to be a Glossy Ibis, a rare migrant or post-breeding visitor to the western part of the Piedmont. This species was last reported from Guilford County in September of 2017. (White Ibis has been nearly annual in recent years. White-faced Ibis has been reported only once, in April of 2015.)

**American White Pelican** (3<sup>rd</sup> Report) – In the period of May 20 to 21, Tropical Storm Arthur churned up the coast and brought with it some interesting birds. On the 20<sup>th</sup>, Matt Wangerin, Andrew Thornton, and others were birding at the mudflats along Hamburg Mill Road where a Great Blue Heron rookery is located. In rapid order they located an Anhinga (7<sup>th</sup> report, see Table 1) and an American White Pelican. The latter is described by the Carolina Bird Club as a rare migrant and winter visitor to the Piedmont where it favors large reservoirs (e.g., currently below the dam at High Rock Lake in Davidson County.)

**Jaeger (sp.)** (3<sup>rd</sup> Report) – We debated about inclusion of this candidate because its identity could not be pinned down at the species level – a notoriously difficult task under the best of viewing conditions. Andrew Thornton saw the bird in flight over Mabel Lane in the southeastern part of Guilford County on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of October. There are three possibilities: Pomarine Jaeger (three birds reported from Lake Townsend in 1984), Long-tailed Jaeger, and Parasitic Jaeger. There are very few records of any of these species in North Carolina's Piedmont (i.e., three records of Long-tailed, five records of Pomarine, and six records of Parasitic). Any one of these would be a remarkable sighting in our neck of the woods.

**Arctic Tern** (1<sup>st</sup> Report) – Tropical Storm Arthur, mentioned earlier, led Andrew Thornton to the North Overlook at Oak Hollow Lake on the 21<sup>st</sup> of May where he was greeted by a large number of terns. Among the several birds present was one that got his attention. It resembled the several Common Terns flying near and resting on the dam, but it did not quite fit. Further study and eventual examination of photographs of the bird in flight and resting on the dam structure pinned its identification down to that of an Arctic Tern. When in flight, the bird's primaries showed only very narrow black tips. And when the bird was standing, especially when next to one of its Common Tern cousins, its very short legs were obvious. This species is a long-distance migrant that normally would be found far offshore, out of sight of land. It is the first report for Guilford County and only the seventh record for the Piedmont. It is believed that all of these records were storm-related.

**Black-chinned Hummingbird** (1<sup>st</sup> Report) – Our final contender is a winter visitor whose eventual arrival in Guilford County was forecast by a panel of PBC birders several years ago. Andrew Thornton received word about a hummingbird that was visiting a feeder in southern Greensboro. It resembled a Ruby-throated Hummingbird, but that species is usually gone by the time December 12 rolls around. Further study of the bird in hand, during its subsequent banding by Susan Campbell, revealed it to be a Black-chinned Hummingbird. Bill structure and the drab color of the crown helped separate it from the very similar Ruby-throated Hummingbird. This bird is the first for Guilford County and only the eighth record for North Carolina's Piedmont. The bird is still coming to its accustomed feeder as of late January.

## AND THE WINNER IS .....

My own bias toward County Firsts is revealed again by my choice for the Best Bird of 2020. Some may disagree and lean toward a species not even formally nominated (e.g., one of the gaudy Wood - Warblers) but my choice is between the stubby-legged and the gray-pated – a tern versus a hummingbird. Many will no doubt choose the Black-chinned Hummingbird, a worthy contender, but my heart belongs to the **Arctic Tern**.

Who knows what bird will take the crown in 2021!



Photo credits to Matt Wangerin



### Postscript

Honorable mentions go to the VA Rail and her or his companion that spent a good portion of the year with us out on Howerton Road. This intrepid bird continues to be heard in mid-January of 2021. The stupendous flock of 17 (!) Lesser Black-backed Gulls on Lake Townsend late last January also deserves mention. This was an astounding flock for the North Carolina Piedmont. Finally, we would be remiss not to mention Rockingham County's Kirtland's Warbler, found and photographed only a few hundred yards from the Guilford County line. Oh so close!