

## Guilford County's Best Birds – 2018

The current year was excellent from a birder's point of view. Birders reporting their sightings on eBird collectively tallied 235 different species. This figure represents 84 percent of the total number of species reported from Guilford County since the inception of eBird. Things got off to a rollicking start on New Year's Day when eBirders reported 72 species, or just over 30 percent of the birds reported all year! Included among the year's sightings were knockouts such as Blackburnian Warbler, perennial favorites such as Brown-headed Nuthatch, and more unusual birds made notable by their relative rarity. These latter species, referred to as Guilford County's "Best Birds," are the focus of this annual report.

In keeping with the methodology of previous years, an arbitrary criterion was used to determine how unusual a reported bird was. Birds that over many years have been reported on only 10 or fewer occasions were deemed "unusual." The 24 species meeting this criterion are listed in Table 1 along with the date they were first reported to eBird and the location where the sighting occurred. Birds are listed in the order in which they were reported.

TABLE 1  
CANDIDATES FOR 2018 BIRD OF THE YEAR

SPECIES	DATE FIRST REPORTED	LOCATION
Cackling Goose*	1/3	Summit Lake Drive, Browns Summit
Rufous Hummingbird	1/9	Hobbs Road, Greensboro
Snow Goose	1/9	Doggett Road, east (Lake Townsend)
Ross's Goose	2/3	Howerton Road
Greater White-fronted Goose*	3/1	Guilford College Campus
Great Cormorant	3/17	Doggett Road, east (Lake Townsend)
Lesser Black-backed Gull	3/24	Lake Townsend Marina
Chuck-will's-widow	4/9	Layton Road
Cattle Egret	4/22	Horsepen Creek flats
Wood Stork*	5/17	Manson Road
Painted Bunting*	5/18	Baldwin Road
Mourning Warbler	5/18	Horsepen Creek, Lake Brandt
Least Bittern*	6/3	Bryan Park Picnic Shelter Area
Short-billed Dowitcher	7/7	Palmetto Trail, Lake Brandt
Roseate Spoonbill*	7/24	Plainfield Marsh Causeway
Golden-winged Warbler	9/12	Howerton Road
Sooty Tern*	9/15	Lowes's Parking Lot, High Point
Royal Tern*	9/15	Lake Brandt, and Lake Townsend
Red-necked Phalarope	9/16	Yanceyville Causeway, Lake Townsend
Jaeger (species)*	9/16	Yanceyville Causeway, Lake Townsend
Yellow-bellied Flycatcher*	9/21	Smoke Hollow, Oak Ridge
Black Scoter	11/18	Price Park Collection Pond
Anhinga*	11/25	Church Street Causeway, Lake Townsend
Sandhill Crane	12/2	Jamestown

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

The unusual birds of 2018 were tallied in all months except August and October. During these two months the lakes were very full and their mudflats were seldom exposed. Perhaps this also helps explain why only one unusual shorebird (Short-billed Dowitcher) was reported in 2018. On the other hand, the deluge in mid-September associated with Tropical Depression *Florence* blessed us with four especially unusual birds, three of which had previously been reported on five or fewer occasions.

Instead of discussing all the candidates shown in Table 1, we have narrowed the field to those species that historically have been reported five or fewer times. Last year, nine birds met this criterion. This year 11 qualify as our candidates for best bird.

## LEADING CANDIDATES

**Greater White-fronted Goose** (5<sup>th</sup> Report) – On March 1, Lynn Moseley, Professor Emerita of Guilford College, was visiting the campus on an errand. During her visit a former colleague alerted her to the presence of an unusual goose on campus. Lynn quickly found and photographed a Greater White-fronted Goose hanging out on the main campus in the company of Canada Geese. The bird was eventually seen by many observers. The last sighting before this was of a single bird at Buffalo Lakes dam in January, 2016.

**Wood Stork** (5<sup>th</sup> Report) – Wood Storks were last reported in 2011. Back then three reports came in over nearly a month, presumably involving one or more of the same three birds. On May 17, Andrew Thornton found this year's bird soaring over Manson Road in Julian. Andrew, aka "Quick Draw," was able to whip out his camera and obtain a great photo of this bird as it flew overhead.

**Yellow-bellied Flycatcher** (5<sup>th</sup> Report) – On September 21, Tory Pegg found and photographed a single bird along Smoke Hollow Road in northwest Guilford County. Two sightings of this flycatcher species were also reported last year.

**Least Bittern** (4<sup>th</sup> Report) – The three previous reports of this species were from the early-to- mid-1960s. We have had to wait over 50 years for this fourth report. On June 3, Andrew Thornton again struck gold! Andrew visited a seldom-birded area north of the Bryan Park Picnic Shelter where a large cattail swamp is located. Andrew heard and recorded the bird's vocalizations. At least two other parties saw Andrew's posting and were also able to find the bird. No one laid eyes on it. Perhaps it will be more accommodating in 2019.

**Anhinga** (4<sup>th</sup> Report) – On November 25, William Falls was birding in the area where Reedy Fork Creek empties into Lake Townsend at Church Street. He noted a few Double-crested Cormorants swimming together and another bird also swimming, but keeping to itself. He could hardly believe his eyes when the latter bird flew up to perch in a tree and assume the classic Anhinga pose. Last year's Doggett Road bird showed up in late August and continued to be reported until at least mid-October.

**Painted Bunting** (3<sup>rd</sup> Report) – The two previous reports of Painted Bunting came during the month of May. The second of these was the female that graced Don and Carolyn Allen's feeders in 2004. On May 18 of this year, Rick Payne followed suit with a male. Rick was birding along Baldwin Road, presumably checking on the status of the Dickcissels that have recently nested in that area, when he saw a striking multi-colored bird. He identified it as a male Painted Bunting. Many birders, upon reading Rick's report,

descended on the area and with patience were rewarded with great looks at and wonderful photos of this beautiful species.

**Cackling Goose** (2<sup>nd</sup> Report) – This bird has been the subject of intensive searches for several years. A few individuals have turned up from time to time in the company of what apparently are migrating Canada Geese, but for whatever reasons, they have decided to stay over in Forsyth County. There has only been one report of Cackling Goose in Guilford County and unfortunately that was provided by a single observer who was unable to obtain a photograph. All of that changed on January 3, when Henry Link, Ann Van Sant, Roberta Newton, and Matt Wangerin scoped a flock of geese on frozen ponds along Summit Lake Drive. After careful study it became apparent that two of the geese were indeed Cackling Geese, looking superficially like small Canadas. Many observers saw these birds and many good photographs were taken. The flock of Canadas with the two Cackling Geese in tow eventually made it over to the dam at Lake Townsend where they remained from the 5<sup>th</sup> through the 7<sup>th</sup>.

**Roseate Spoonbill** (2<sup>nd</sup> Report) – The only previous report of this species occurred on July 14, 2009 when an immature bird was observed by Water Resources personnel who had traveled by airboat up to the Reedy Fork flats at the western end of Lake Townsend. Tom Baker found the 2018 bird on July 24 at Plainfield Marsh, just a few hundred yards downstream from the previous sighting. Tom's bird was enjoyed by several folks before it flew off in the company of a Great Egret. Some enterprising souls checked out the Great Egret roost west of US 220 that evening and the following morning. They were rewarded with additional looks at this pinkish bird with the strange bill.

**Royal Tern** (2<sup>nd</sup> Report) – Two or possibly three of these large terns turned up on September 15 in the aftermath of Tropical Storm *Florence*. Andrew Thornton, the Links, and other birders reported this bird from near the spillway at Lake Brandt in the company of Common and Forster's Terns. At this same time, George Wheaton had a single Royal Tern east of the Yanceyville Causeway at Lake Townsend. The previous report of this species involved three birds on August 30, 2011. That trio may have been blown inland by Hurricane *Irene*.

**Jaeger sp.** (2<sup>nd</sup> Report) – On September 16, a day after remnants of Tropical Storm *Florence* passed through Guilford County, Andrew Thornton conducted a watch at the Yanceyville Causeway over Lake Townsend. Andrew identified a jaeger and watched it harass a Royal Tern, and then knock a Laughing Gull down onto the water. Andrew provided some details of the jaeger but was unable to identify it positively at the species level. This is the first jaeger report since the summer of 1984 when three Pomarine Jaegers spent over a month on Lake Townsend.

**Sooty Tern** (1<sup>st</sup> Report) – The only new species added to Guilford County's list in 2018 was Sooty Tern. On September 15 a single immature bird was found on the parking lot of the Lowe's store in High Point. This bird also was blown into our area by Tropical Storm *Florence*. Some unknown Good Samaritans took the exhausted and dehydrated bird to a local vet's office. From there it was taken to a local rehab facility. Eventually, the bird was driven to another rehab facility on Hatteras Island. After a lengthy convalescence it was successfully released to resume its travels.

#### **DRUM ROLL, PLEASE...THE WINNER IS...**

There are many worthy candidates this year, including candidates not listed in Table 1. But in this judge's mind, there is one clear-cut winner of the title "Best Bird of 2018." My vote goes to the Sooty Tern. It displayed great courage, persevering in the face of overwhelming adversity. It was charismatic as

few things are these days. And it was very handsome in an elegant understated way. (To the extent this bird had any competition I felt it came from the male Painted Bunting and the Roseate Spoonbill.)