

Guilford County's Best Birds – 2023

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During the year just ended, birders who combed Guilford County from one end to the other reported a total of 20 birds that have been arbitrarily labeled as “unusual.” As has become our custom, unusual birds are defined as those reported 10 or fewer times over many decades. This year’s total of 20 unusual birds is nearly as many as the 22 reported in 2022 but well below the 31 reported in 2021. The 20 are this year’s candidates for “Bird of the Year.” They are presented in Table 1.

The winter months this year (i.e., December, January, February) were wetter and warmer than usual. In response, many birds, especially northern waterfowl, apparently stayed north on open water. There were three unusual winter birds of note: our returning Say’s Phoebe in February, the Short-eared Owls recently discovered in late December, and the Ross’s Goose also found in late December. Spring migration (March - May) added four, eight were reported in the summer (June – August), and the final five were reported in the fall (September – November). Unusual birds were reported in about the same numbers throughout all four seasons with most being reported this year in summer.

TABLE 1
CANDIDATES FOR BIRD OF THE YEAR

SPECIES	DATE FIRST REPORTED	LOCATION
Say’s Phoebe*	2/13/23	Howerton Road, County Farm
Least Bittern	3/28/23	Howerton Road, County Farm
Greater White-fronted Goose	4/6/23	Lake Townsend Marina
Anhinga	4/6/23	High Point City Lake
Golden-winged Warbler	5/7/23	Bryan Park Picnic Shelter Area
Least Tern*	6/18/23	Oak Hollow Lake
Willet	6/20/23	Horsepen Creek Mudflats
Willet	7/5/23	Oak Hollow Lake, Festival Park
Roseate Spoonbill	7/7/23	Davis Lake, High Point
Swallow-tailed Kite*	7/8/23	NC 150, Summerfield
Short-billed Dowitcher	7/22/23	Horsepen Creek Mudflats
Roseate Spoonbill	7/31/23	Richardson Taylor Preserve
Swallow-tailed Kite*	8/14/23	I-85 South, High Point
Western Tanager*	9/13/23	Bald Eagle Trail, Lake Higgins
Clay-colored Sparrow*	9/20/23	Oak Hollow Lake, North Overlook
Connecticut Warbler	10/7/23	Howerton Road, County Farm
Virginia Rail	11/9/23	Howerton Road, County Farm
Ash-throated Flycatcher*	11/24/23	Howerton Road, County Farm
Short-eared Owl*	12/21/23	Howerton Road, County Farm
Ross’s Goose	12/27/23	Bridford Parkway, Greensboro

- Species with an asterisk have been reported five or fewer times.

LEADING CONTENDERS

The seven leading contenders for “Bird of the Year” are those that have been reported five or fewer times. Each is highlighted below.

Clay-colored Sparrow (5th report) – This bird has become one of Andrew Thornton’s specialties. Andrew found this year’s Clay-colored Sparrow at the North Overlook of Oak Hollow Lake on the 20th of September. The bird was hanging out on a fence near the playground. The bird posed for photographs that cemented its identification and separated it from the very similar appearing Chipping Sparrow.

Swallow-tailed Kite (4th and 5th reports) - The fourth and fifth reports of Swallow-tailed Kite were provided about a month apart and came from different parts of the county. Matt Wangerin’s bird was noticed on July 8 while Matt drove along NC 150 in Summerfield. Matt was able to stop and photograph this bird as it flew along the highway. Heather Buttonow had a similar experience on August 14 as she drove along I-85 South near High Point. She too was able to stop and photograph this bird as it flew by. (It does make one wonder what Matt and Heather are focusing on as they drive down a highway.)

These two reports may be of the same individual but they are treated here as involving two different birds.

Least Tern (3rd report) - The county’s third report of a Least Tern was provided by Milko Gervet on June 18. Milko found his bird at Oak Hollow Lake. The bird was flying and then diving to feed. Milko was able to obtain a good photograph which aided his identification and pointed to an adult bird in breeding plumage. The two previous reports were in August of 1996 and August of 2021.

Western Tanager (3rd report) - While hiking along the Bald Eagle Trail near Lake Higgins on September 13, Heather Buttonow again struck it rich. This time she happened upon a Western Tanager hanging out in the crown of a *Pinus virginiana*. Heather was able to take some photographs but was unable to get a shot that clearly showed the presence or absence of wing bars. She reported wing bars, however, and the sighting was accepted by ebird. Two other features of this sighting are of interest. Most reports of Western Tanager in North Carolina involve birds that show up in the winter. And, when they do, they are most often seen at feeders. However, there have been a few sightings as early as September. In any event, the bird is quite beautiful.

Short-eared Owl (2nd report) – On December 21, Vern Bothwell and Joe Donahue were out at the County Farm on Howerton Road for some early morning birding. They were concentrating on the area where the Ash-throated Flycatcher had been found a month earlier (see below). What to their wondering eyes should appear but the county’s second Short-eared Owl. Other birders, who quickly arrived on the scene, reported as many as three of these beautiful owls. Many birders have come from near and far to see and hopefully photograph at least one member of the owl trio. This has been a challenging task because the owls are in a very large

field whose undulating terrain limits one's view and the owls prefer to hunt and fly just at dawn or dusk in low light conditions. The only other report of Short-eared Owl in Guilford County was provided by T. Gilbert Pearson, 121 years ago in 1902!

Say's Phoebe (1st report) – The Say's Phoebe, first reported on October 16, 2021 by Jon Randolph, has been an on-again off-again visitor. The same bird was reported scores of times from its initial sighting through April 10, 2022; after an absence of more than five months it was resighted by Lou Skrabec on September 29, 2022, and was last reported on April 6, 2023. We can't be positive but all of these reports most likely involve the same bird. While visiting with us, it spent its many days hanging out with "Jax" and "Opie" at the County Farm on Howerton Road.

Ash-throated Flycatcher (1st report) – Tom Baker was birding at the County Farm bordering Howerton Road on November 24. He wandered up the "Farm Vehicles Only" dirt road off Howerton and was drawn to activity in the row of Cedar trees that line the farm road. He located what appeared to be a large flycatcher working the trees and took two exquisite photographs of the bird. Subsequent inspection of the photographs led to the bird's identification. Details shown in the photographs and the late date eliminated the bird's close cousin, Great-crested Flycatcher. Tom had photographed the county's first Ash-throated Flycatcher. This visitor to North Carolina is most often found closer to the coast where it is an unusual, late fall visitor. There are relatively few records for the Piedmont where the bird is considered a "casual stray/visitor." Interestingly, several years ago a panel of 15 Piedmont Bird Club birders was asked to predict which birds would eventually turn up in Guilford County. Out of the 15 pundits, only Emily Tyler and Shelley Rutkin nominated Ash-throated Flycatcher.

THE WINNER IS ...

The task of selecting one bird as Bird of the Year is always difficult. Several factors come into play: Is the bird the first of its kind to be reported? How much excitement does it generate among members of the birding community? What is its "wow factor"? And on and on. The author is usually swayed by a candidate's rarity. Is it a first-time visitor to Guilford County? Two birds hold that distinction in 2023, the hold-over Say's Phoebe and November's Ash-throated Flycatcher. But this time I think the "wow factor" must be given a lot of weight. My nomination for the best bird of 2023 goes to the three **Short-eared Owls** which delighted large numbers of birders and photographers. Hopefully not a lot of time will pass before they once again pay us a visit.

EPILOGUE

We end this year's contest on a more somber note. The author moved to Greensboro 17 years ago. In the intervening years it has been his great good fortune to bird extensively in Guilford County. He therefore is sad to report that 2023 was the first year in which he neither saw nor heard that hauntingly beautiful songster, the Wood Thrush. Hopefully this was due to the decreasing power of his own sensory apparatus rather than to a serious decline in numbers of Wood Thrush.