

## Guilford County's Best Birds – 2024

Several unusual birds visited Guilford County in 2024, and they did so throughout the year. Indeed, with the exceptions of March and November, postings of unusual sightings occurred in every month, and under a wide range of weather conditions. Winter months were much warmer than usual. Spring months were very wet. Summer and fall were drier than usual.

We don't know how these patterns affected birds visiting our region. Perhaps, however, the warmer winter conditions, especially to our north, convinced several species of waterfowl to forego a trip south.

In any event, there were roughly 50 reports of birds we don't often encounter in Guilford County. The more unusual birds, those for which there historically have been 10 or fewer reports, are listed in Table 1 in the order in which they were reported. Thirteen species met this criterion. We have selected a subset of these, the eight that have been reported five or fewer times, as this year's candidates for Bird of the Year.

TABLE 1  
CANDIDATES FOR BIRD OF THE YEAR

SPECIES	DATE FIRST REPORTED	LOCATION
Short-eared Owl*	1/1/24	Howerton Road, County Farm
American White Pelican*	4/14/24	Lake Brandt
Virginia Rail	4/15/24	Howerton Road, County Farm
Willet	5/10/24	Hamburg Mill Rd. Mudflats
Scissor-tailed Flycatcher*	5/19/24	Baldwin Rd., Sockwell Rd.
Least Tern*	6/16/24	Hamburg Mill Rd. Mudflats
Least Tern*	6/27/24	Oak Hollow Lake, North Overlook
Painted Bunting*	7/9/24	Feeder on Oakcliffe Road
Olive-sided Flycatcher	8/19/24	Penns Grove Rd., Summerfield
Baird's Sandpiper*	8/30/24	Palmetto Trail, Lake Brandt
Lark Sparrow	9/2/24	Howerton Road, County Farm
Alder Flycatcher*	9/2/24	Baldwin Road
American Avocet	10/2/24	Oak Hollow Lake, N. Overlook
Eurasian Collared-Dove*	10/3/24	"Tucket," Guilford County
Eurasian Collared-Dove*	12/2/24	Benaja Road, Guilford County

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

## Meet the Candidates

In this annual contest we focus on the most unusual birds reported during the year. These are not necessarily the best songsters, nor the prettiest, although this year's Painted Bunting could certainly compete for that honor. Candidates are presented in order from least, relatively speaking, to most unusual.

**American White Pelican** (5<sup>th</sup> report) – Hunter Lieb was birding along the Palmetto Trail at Lake Brandt in mid-April when he spotted a flock of nine American White Pelicans resting out in the middle of the lake. He took photos and then alerted other birders. Many showed up and enjoyed these unusual visitors, which stayed with us for an additional four days. The first report of this species occurred in 2012.

**Baird's Sandpiper** (5<sup>th</sup> report) – The mudflats visible from the Palmetto Trail were again the place to be at the end of August. A Baird's Sandpiper was discovered feeding with several small peeps in grassy areas along the edges of the mudflats. Many observers eventually came to tick and photograph this bird. The county's fourth report of this species came from the same area in early September of 2021.

**Painted Bunting** (5<sup>th</sup> report) – Those of us who attended the recent PBC holiday dinner and slide show were treated to wonderful photographs of this spectacular species. Guilford County's fifth report came in early July. The bird visited a feeder maintained by Steve Herr.

**Eurasian Collared-Dove** (4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> reports) – This species is reported to have established a small colony just to our north in Reidsville (Rockingham County). Individuals, apparently from that colony, occasionally drift south and are reported in Guilford County. Such may have been the case this year. The fourth report, involving a single bird, came from Roberta Newton who saw the bird just north of Plainfield Road in early October. The fifth encounter came two months later when Brian Bockhahn reported this species as a flyover along Benaja Road.

**Least Tern** (4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> reports) – This species, usually found near the coast, arrived on the 16<sup>th</sup> of June. It visited the Lake Brandt mudflats along Hamburg Mill Road where it was seen and photographed by many observers. This was the fourth report of this species in the county. Nearly two weeks later, on the 27<sup>th</sup>, this species was again reported, but from the North Overlook at Oak Hollow Lake. Heather Buttonow photographed this bird in flight. This could of course be the same individual reported earlier from Lake Brandt, but we treated it here as a second visitor. It was the fifth for Guilford County.

**Short-eared Owl** (2<sup>nd</sup> report) – The excitement surrounding the Short-eared Owls discovered at the County Farm off Howerton Road in late 2023 continued into January of 2024. There were many observers, both at dawn and dusk, who reported two or three owls hunting over a large area south of Howerton Road. Many excellent photographs were obtained. This species was deemed Bird of the Year in 2023. Hopes are high for a repeat performance in 2025, albeit probably at a different location with better cover and more potential prey!

**Alder Flycatcher** (2<sup>nd</sup> report) – On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of September Andrew Thornton, Matt Wangerin, and Henry Link were at Baldwin Road, wrapping up a morning of birding. While watching a small drainage area near the north end of Baldwin they noted the presence of an *Empidonax* flycatcher, a bird notoriously difficult to identify at the species level. Two members of this genus are especially difficult to differentiate: Willow Flycatcher and Alder Flycatcher. Many authorities believe the only way to identify them positively is to listen to their vocalizations, which of course, they may or may not utter.

Fortunately, the bird uttered a call note for our trio of birders. Its vocalization was consistent with that of an Alder Flycatcher. Other birders arrived on scene, staying for a good portion of the afternoon. Many photographs were taken, a second “*Empid*” was reported from the same location, but the bird(s) chose not to vocalize.

The first Alder Flycatcher in Guilford County was reported in 1958. Another bird that was either an Alder or a Willow Flycatcher was reported in August of 2020. That bird was accorded the label of Traill’s Flycatcher because it remained silent and therefore could not be identified with certainty. (Traill’s Flycatcher was once used to name Willow/Alder Flycatchers, which were deemed a single species.)

**Scissor-tailed Flycatcher** (1<sup>st</sup> report) – The 19<sup>th</sup> of May was a pretty day in many respects, especially so for the several birders who were spread out across the county hoping for some late migrating birds. Brian Pendergraft was birding along Baldwin Road, looking no doubt for Grasshopper Sparrows and other goodies. Imagine his astonishment when a larger and longer-tailed bird came into view as it hawked insects along the fence lines. It was a beautiful adult Scissor-tailed Flycatcher that had journeyed east from its more usual haunts in Texas and Oklahoma. Brian whipped out his cell phone and immediately alerted other birders, several of whom arrived on the scene in short order. But the bird could not be relocated. Having received his alert while at home, Henry Link then arrived on the scene and expanded the search area to include the farm on nearby Sockwell Road. Eureka! Henry relocated the bird to the delight of the many birders now assembled. Unfortunately, the bird was a one-day wonder, not being reported on subsequent days.

There have been several reports of Scissor-tailed Flycatchers from the North Carolina Piedmont, primarily to the east of us. This species has nested in North Carolina.

## **The Winner**

The decision of the judge is unanimous this year! Guilford County’s Bird of the Year in 2024 is the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher. The bird is a first for the county. It is a spectacular bird, whether perched or in flight, because of its very long forked tail. It also is an especially beautiful bird: light gray head and upperparts, dark gray wings, stunning pink underwing coverts and belly, alternating black and white segments of the forked tail. Thank you to those who first found this bird and to those who subsequently relocated it.