

## Guilford County's Best Birds – 2019

The year just ended seemed to deliver fewer unusual birds than reported in previous years. Perhaps this was due in part to a relatively warmer winter to our north, which prompted the birds to stay put rather than to travel south. Perhaps it was due to a wetter summer that kept lake levels up and reduced shorebird habitat. Finally, perhaps the appearance of relatively fewer unusual birds stemmed from the fact that birders in the county have been changing our notions of which species are truly unusual, defined in terms of frequency of occurrence, and which are more regular than previously thought.

In keeping with methodology used previously, birds that over many years have been reported on ten or fewer occasions are treated as “unusual.” Last year 24 birds met this criterion. This year only 13 birds were deemed unusual. These birds are listed in Table 1 together with the date on which they were reported to *eBird* and the location where the sighting occurred. Birds are listed chronologically in the order in which they were first reported.

TABLE 1

### CANDIDATES FOR 2019 BIRD OF THE YEAR

SPECIES	DATE FIRST REPORTED	LOCATION
Cackling Goose*	2/14	Howerton Road
Greater White-fronted Goose	2/25	Howerton Road
Chuck-will's-widow	3/25	Woodrow Lane, Highpoint
Clay-colored Sparrow*	4/23	Price Park, Highwoods Trail
Lark Sparrow*	6/2	Howerton Road
Eurasian Collared-Dove*	6/19	Howerton Road
Horned Lark	6/21	Monticello BBS route
Anhinga*	8/8	Horsepen Creek Flats
Wood Stork*	9/19	Gibson Park
Connecticut Warbler	9/28	Price Park Highwoods Trail
Short-billed Dowitcher	10/14	Palmetto Trail, Lake Brandt
Sedge Wren	10/18	Howerton Road
Virginia Rail	12/11	Howerton Road

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

### LEADING CANDIDATES

**Anhinga** (5<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> reports) – On August 8, Matt Wangerin braved the heat and hiked in along the Nat Green trail to the Horsepen Creek mudflats. While ostensibly searching for shorebirds, his efforts were amply rewarded with a sighting of the County's 5<sup>th</sup> Anhinga. (Roberta Newton followed suit on October 23 when she provided the county's sixth report of this species. Roberta's bird was at Oak Hollow Lake.)

**Wood Stork** (5<sup>th</sup> report) – On September 19, Sarah Van Cannon was birding along the Bicentennial Greenway in High Point when she chanced upon a Wood Stork. Two days later Andrew Thornton

relocated this bird as well as a second that was traveling with it. The same birds, both juveniles, are believed to have been the subject of both reports.

**Lark Sparrow** (3<sup>rd</sup> report) – On June 2, Dawn Lloyd was birding along Howerton Road when she chanced upon an interesting sparrow with bold facial markings. The bird was identified as a Lark Sparrow. This third report for the County occurred in almost the same location as the second county bird reported three years earlier by Marty Wall (7/21/16).

**Eurasian Collared-Dove** (3<sup>rd</sup> report, first with photo) - On June 19, Dawn Lloyd was again birding along Howerton Road where she noticed several doves sitting on power lines that parallel the road. Upon closer inspection, she saw that one dove was clearly larger than the others. She had good looks at the bird both on the wire and in flight and was able to obtain some photos. The bird was determined to be a Eurasian Collared-Dove, which is a cousin of the smaller Mourning Doves that frequent Howerton Road. Eurasian Collared-Doves are reported to have a colony in nearby Gibsonville (Alamance County) and rarely stray from that location. Two earlier reports from Guilford County may have been of this species but were not documented with photos.

**Cackling Goose** (3<sup>rd</sup> report) – On February 14, Andrew Thornton, also a Howerton Road enthusiast, was birding the ponds in that area. Taking the time to carefully sort through the large flock of Canada Geese that hangs out in and on the margins of the “North Pond,” he identified three smaller Cackling Geese. These three birds were subsequently seen and photographed by many observers.

**Clay-colored Sparrow** (1<sup>st</sup> report) – On April 23, Andrew Thornton was out birding closer to downtown Greensboro. On this particular day he was birding along the Highwoods Trail portion of Price Park. As he worked through the usual batch of backyard birds his attention was drawn to a strikingly plumaged sparrow. The bird in question turned out to be Guilford County’s first record for Clay-colored Sparrow. Although it was seen by a few other fortunate souls, the bird turned out to be a one-day wonder and could not be relocated on subsequent visits. We were fortunate that this bird turned up in the spring when it is boldly marked and can be readily identified. In the fall, its adult and juvenile plumages often resemble those of other *Spizella* sparrows (i.e., Brewer’s Sparrow and Chipping Sparrow). These similarities can lead to some tricky identification problems.



### **AND THE WINNER IS...**

Like most politicians, I am going to waffle this year and choose more than one “bird of the year.” My top choice is Guilford County’s first Clay-colored Sparrow, decked out as it was in full breeding plumage. (Please see Lou Skrabec’s stunning photo.) Birders had predicted its eventual arrival but they had to wait a long time for its first appearance.

My other two candidates are less unusual, especially if one considers birds over the decades, but they have not graced us with their presence in a long time. Accordingly, my second candidate is the Virginia Rail that showed up in late December and is still being reported (from Howerton Road). There have only been six prior reports of this species, the most recent of these having occurred 30 years ago. Indeed, our last Virginia Rail did not enjoy a nice visit. It was found DOR (dead-on-road) somewhere along Friendly Avenue in 1989.

My third candidate for “best bird of 2019” is this year’s Connecticut Warbler. (Maybe we should just have a contest for “warbler of the year.” We don’t give them the attention they deserve!). This year’s Connecticut is only the County’s 7<sup>th</sup> and the first in 11 years. Matt Wangerin’s photograph nicely captures the bird’s gray hood and large, tell-tale, white eye-ring. (Coincidentally, the Clay-colored Sparrow was found five months earlier in this same location.)

What do you think? Would you be swayed by beauty, by length of absence, or by magnetic charm?



Connecticut Warbler Photo by Matt Wangerin 9/28/2019



Virginia Rail, photo credit Cornell Lab