

Guilford County's Best Birds – 2021

by PBC member George Wheaton

PROLOGUE

Before discussing the best birds of 2021, let's take a brief trip down memory lane to consider the decade just ended and the avian treats that it provided. Some of the most notable visitors are listed in Table 1. These birds bring back fond memories for those of us who had the good fortune to be birding in Guilford County at the time. All but two of the entries are of birds that were encountered for the first time in the county.

TABLE 1
NOTABLE BIRDS VISITING GUILFORD COUNTY, 2011 – 2020

Year	Notable Birds
2011	Clapper Rail, Royal Tern
2012	American White Pelican
2013	Piping Plover (2 nd report)
2014	Black-necked Stilt
2015	White-faced Ibis, Franklin's Gull
2016	Iceland Gull
2017	Sabine's Gull, Snowy Owl (2 nd report)
2018	Sooty Tern
2019	Clay-colored Sparrow
2020	Arctic Tern, Black-chinned Hummingbird

THIS YEAR'S CANDIDATES

So much for nostalgia. What birds were arguably the "best" in 2021? In this context "best" means most unusual and is arbitrarily defined by the number of times a species has appeared in Guilford County. Unusual species are those that have been reported ten or fewer times over many decades. In 2019 and again in 2020, only 13 species met this criterion. In 2021 an astounding 31 did so! The reasons for this uptick remain a mystery but probably include several factors: greater numbers of birders – perhaps pushed outdoors by COVID-19, improving identification skills, and more reporting on eBird.

Those species meeting the criterion are listed in Table 2 with the date on which they were first 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. Fifteen of these candidates have visited us on five or fewer occasions. They are denoted by an asterisk.

Two features of this year's candidates are of interest. First, most presumably came for a short visit but some then remained for relatively long periods. Birds apparently enjoying the ambiance and food included:

- Virginia Rails, with one reported on January 2, which remained and was joined by a second bird through at least March 26
- Anhingas, three first reported on March 2, at least one of which remained through August 1

- Roseate Spoonbill, first reported on June 23, that was joined shortly thereafter by two additional birds, with all three remaining together until October 10
- Say's Phoebe first reported on October 16 that is still with us in mid-January of 2022.

A second interesting feature of the reports listed in Table 2 is their distribution over time. Eight reports occurred in winter. One occurred in spring. Six were provided in late summer and 16 came throughout the fall. What happened during spring migration?

TABLE 2
CANDIDATES FOR BIRD OF THE YEAR – 2021

SPECIES	DATE FIRST REPORTED	LOCATION
Virginia Rail (2 birds)	1/2	Howerton Road pond
Western Tanager*	1/4	Feeder, Eastern Guilford Cnty.
Eared Grebe*	1/29	Lake Townsend, Doggett Road
Lark Sparrow*	2/1	Watchtower Road
Rufous Hummingbird	2/8	Fry Street, Greensboro
Anhinga (3 birds)	3/2	High Pt. City Lake, Greenway
Lesser Black-backed Gull	3/3	Lake Townsend, Doggett Rd.
Lesser Black-backed Gull	3/5	Oak Hollow Lake marina
Roseate Spoonbill* (3 birds)	6/23	Oak Hollow Lake, Skeet Clb. Rd.
Black-bellied Whistling-Duck* (3 birds)	8/17	Palmetto Trail, Horsepen Creek
Black-bellied Plover	8/18	Palmetto Trail, Horsepen Creek
Ruddy Turnstone	8/18	Palmetto Trail, Horsepen Creek
Least Tern*	8/19	Palmetto Trail, Horsepen Creek
Sedge Wren	8/30	Howerton Road
Yellow-bellied Flycatcher	8/31	Howerton Road
Baird's Sandpiper*	9/4	Horsepen Creek Flats
Red-necked Phalarope	9/4	Horsepen Creek Flats
Yellow-bellied Flycatcher	9/5	Howerton Road
Yellow-bellied Flycatcher	9/10	Palmetto Trail, Horsepen Creek
Golden-winged Warbler	9/10	Palmetto Trail, Horsepen Creek
Golden-winged Warbler	9/12	HRSP, Iron Ore Access
Lark Sparrow*	9/29	Howerton Road
American Golden-Plover (2 birds)	10/3	Palmetto Trail, Horsepen Creek
Clay-colored Sparrow*	10/4	Watchtower Road
Yellow-bellied Flycatcher	10/5	HRSP, Iron Ore Access
Yellow-bellied Flycatcher	10/8	Nat Greene Trail, Lake Brandt
Painted Bunting*	10/10	Watchtower Road
Say's Phoebe*	10/16	County Farm, Howerton Road
Clay-colored Sparrow*	10/28	Watchtower Road
Great Cormorant	11/29	Lake Townsend, power pole
American White Pelican*	12/4	High Point City Lake Park

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

LEADING CANDIDATES

Eared Grebe (4th report) – On January 29, Matt Wangerin and Henry Link broke a 26-year dry spell with their sighting of an Eared Grebe on Lake Townsend. The bird was relocated on the 30th and seen by many observers from the Yanceyville causeway over Lake Townsend. At this location the bird was in the company of several Horned Grebes, providing a marvelous opportunity to compare the two species side-by-side, sometimes in the same field of view.

Lark Sparrow (4th and 5th reports) – On February 1, Andrew Thornton was driving and birding along Watchtower Road, a dirt road in the southeastern part of the county near Old Julian. At one point he came upon a flock of Chipping Sparrows and while sorting through them was excited to find a Lark Sparrow in their midst. This is the fourth report for the county. The fifth report was from Howerton Road on September 29 by Dawn Lloyd, who obtained a photograph. Three of the five reports for this species have come from Howerton Road.

Baird's Sandpiper (4th report) – Baird's Sandpiper is one of our more unusual sandpipers being outnumbered by its close cousin, White-rumped Sandpiper. On September 2, Paul Sumner, Henry Link, and others provided the county's fourth report of Baird's Sandpiper. It was found on the Horsepen Creek mud flats. The bird was duly photographed and admired by many observers over the following two days.

Painted Bunting (4th report) – On October 10, Andrew Thornton was once again traversing his birding route along Watchtower Road when he came across a female Painted Bunting. Unfortunately, the bird quickly darted out into a corn field and was lost from view. Andrew's report is the fourth for this species in Guilford County.

American White Pelican (4th report) – On the 4th of December, MM reported and provided photos of an American White Pelican that was hanging out at the High Point City Lake Park. This bird stayed for a couple of days and was reported by many observers. Interestingly, the first report for this species occurred in February 2012, when a flock of 20 plus birds landed on Lake Brandt during the year's only snow/sleet storm. The three subsequent reports have involved single birds.

Roseate Spoonbill (3rd, 4th, and 5th reports) – In 2021, Roseate Spoonbill fans were thrilled by the arrival of three different birds. On June 23, Andrew Thornton found the first "tucked back into the northwest corner" of an arm of Oak Hollow Lake. Matt Wangerin reported a single bird at the Horsepen Creek flats (Palmetto Trail) on July 16. On July 17, Andrew reported another at a pond along Ballinger Road and two were reported by Matt on the 28th. The question arose as to how many different individuals these sightings represented. On August 21, Jim Gant and his covey of young birders resolved the matter. They observed three birds at the Horsepen Creek flats. All three of these birds were reported almost daily until the last report of October 10.

Clay-colored Sparrow (2nd and 3rd reports) – On October 4, Andrew Thornton was again birding one of his favorite haunts – Watchtower Road – when he located, photographed, and reported the county's second Clay-colored Sparrow. Birds at this time of the year are very difficult to distinguish from young Chipping Sparrows, which Andrew's bird was traveling with. Nearly a month later, while again birding along Watchtower Road, Andrew came upon another Clay-colored Sparrow. The location of this sighting was about three quarters of a mile from where he had reported the October 4th bird. These two reports may refer to the same individual. We treat them here as two different individuals.

Western Tanager (1st report) – On January 4, Alex Artemenko hosted Guilford County’s first Western Tanager at his feeders. Alex also supplied photos that established the bird’s identity. The sighting occurred in the eastern part of the county near Gibsonville. (Details supplied by Andrew Thornton.)

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck (1st report) – This county-first species was sighted on August 17 by Henry Link at the Horsepen Creek flats as viewed from the Palmetto Trail. Three birds were reported and subsequently seen by many observers. Unfortunately, the birds were “one-day wonders” and could not be relocated on subsequent days.

Least Tern (1st report) – This species was reported two days after the Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks were sighted at the Horsepen Creek flats. Paul Sumner, Henry and Elizabeth Link and many other observers who hiked out to the flats got excellent looks at and diagnostic photographs of this diminutive tern.

Say’s Phoebe (1st report) – According to Cornell Labs and Wikipedia, this tyrant flycatcher nests farther north than any other flycatcher. Its range extends from southern Mexico, through the western US and Canada to Alaska’s arctic tundra. It is normally found in the western US, but on October 16, Jon Randolph found a stray at the County Farm on Howerton Road. The bird apparently likes this setting because it is still there as of mid-January. This is the first of its kind to be reported from Guilford County and has been observed and photographed by many birders who have come from near and far.

DRUM ROLL, PLEASE....

When considering which of our candidates deserves to be named Bird of the Year, I usually go for the most unusual. But this year I’m going to base my choice on a different metric – the number of birders who journeyed to see a bird and who also probably obtained photographs. Using this metric two species stand out for me. The first is **Roseate Spoonbill**, represented by the Tres Amigas(os) that took over Horsepen Creek flats for such a long period. This trio excited novice and veteran birders alike. The **Say’s Phoebe** receives my other vote, and for the same reason. We seldom have had a bird with such charisma, that was so reliable, and that generated such a following.

EPILOGUE

In December of 2012, 15 birders from the Piedmont Bird Club served as a panel to predict what new species of birds might eventually be reported from Guilford County. Considering this year’s four new birds, it is fun to see how well the panel did. Thirteen of the 15 panelists predicted the eventual arrival of a Western Tanager. They expected the bird to show up at a feeder in winter. Not one of the panelists mentioned Black-bellied Whistling-Duck as a possibility. Just two of the panelists, Carolyn Allen and Lary Treanor, peered into their crystal balls and predicted the arrival of Least Tern. Finally, only Shelley Rutkin thought that a Say’s Phoebe would wander our way. Congratulations, Shelley!