

Virginia's Eastern Shore January 13-15, 2018

Submitted by George Wheaton, Trip Leader

The wind blustered and blew! It was cold down there too! Piles of snow from the area's big storm of the preceding week still dotted parking lots. But our band of 10 birders had dressed for the occasion and survived the Piedmont Bird Club's three-day foray to Virginia's Eastern Shore. Our group managed to find and identify 92 species. This total, although a dozen or so less than reported on previous visits, contained some really nice birds. Everyone came home with excellent views of at least one lifer. A complete list of the species encountered is below.

The trip began in earnest after Saturday's drive to Virginia Beach and lunch at McDonald's. We drove the short distance to our first birding spot: the Pleasure House Point Natural Area situated on the western shore of Lynn Haven Inlet. This area is adjacent to the Chesapeake Bay and consists of salt water marshes and sloughs. Ice seen at many fresh water sites was not in evidence, and the tide was lower than we had encountered on previous visits. A stiff breeze hampered our search for Ipswich Sparrows but we were rewarded with other memorable sightings ranging from a solitary Osprey to hunkered down Snowy Egrets. Arguably best, however, were our five sightings of Clapper Rail. Two of these were of birds in flight but the first three were of birds at very close range that were probing for and frequently finding some type of large worm. The birds were out in the open and completely nonchalant. Their close proximity created wonderful photo opportunities. This bird was a "lifer" for several of us and among the best looks ever had by nearly all of us. Our next stop was the eastern edge of Lynn Haven Inlet, which produced nothing new.



Photo Credit: Ann Van Sant, Clapper Rail

We then drove south down through Virginia Beach proper to Rudee Inlet. The wind was blowing hard from the north, creating very rough conditions out in the ocean for birds and on shore for the birders who were trying to spot them. Many good birds, however, were sheltering in the inlet itself. We had excellent looks at both scaup species and at White-winged and Black Scoters. The relatively protected location of these birds permitted detailed examination and discussion of some of the finer identification points. A female Goldeneye was present as were both species of the expected loons, and a few Lesser Black-backed Gulls. Arguably, the best bird was a single Brown Pelican seen by most of our group as it went sailing by to the south. This was the only Brown Pelican seen on the trip!

Conditions were much the same on Sunday – strong north winds and temperatures below freezing. We drove south from Virginia Beach to the Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) where we boarded our "Tram" for an extended birding tour through the refuge and

the adjacent Virginia False Cape State Park. (The tram is a 28-passenger open-sided vehicle.) The impoundments in the Back Bay NWR primarily consist of fresh water, and many of these that were not exposed to the wind sported at least thin layers of ice. Neither wind nor ice deterred the hundreds of Tundra Swans we met along the way. There were numerous American Black Ducks as well as a few waders. One of the waders was a Wilson's Snipe that hunkered down beside our tram and provided wonderful photo opportunities. A single American Bittern and a single Northern Harrier put in brief appearances. The absence of Northern Harriers was compensated for by the presence of multiple Bald Eagles. One highlight of the tram ride was an opportunity to visit False Cape's Visitor Center where there were heated bathrooms and an opportunity to purchase coffee, tea, or hot chocolate. This stop provided a most welcome chance to thaw out!



*Photo Credit: Ann Van Sant,
Wilson's Snipe*



*Photo Credit: Ann Van Sant,
Least Bittern*

Our last birding stop on Sunday was at Little Island Park, which lies just north of Back Bay NWR. This park has a fishing pier that extends out into the ocean and a short trail that leads to a kayak launch site on Back Bay. Conditions on the ocean-side were difficult – cold, windy, and virtually birdless. However, those who chose to walk the short trail to the kayak launch were richly rewarded. The group found a Least Bittern standing in a narrow little cut that was free of ice. The bird was extremely close and was perfectly lighted by the late afternoon sun. Again, many beautiful photos were obtained. This was a “lifer” for many and one of the best views ever! Some of our group found another American Bittern in the nearby marsh.

Monday began with slightly warmer temperatures, a tolerable breeze from the north, and very light snow flurries – perfect weather for our trip to Island #4 of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel complex. This visit was neither as cold nor as windy as some past visits. The seabirds were numerous – all three scoters, large numbers of White-winged and Surf, rafts of Red-breasted Mergansers, and many others. Also notable was a Peregrine Falcon perched on one of the bridge's lamp posts awaiting some poor hapless bird that would serve as lunch or dinner. We were very fortunate to find half a dozen Purple Sandpipers out on the exposed rocks (many of which were ice-covered from wind-blown spray). This species also was a “lifer” for some in our group. The visit was rounded out by two Harbor Seals that floated around off the end of Island #4's rocky point.

Our last birding stops were at locations just north of the bridge-tunnel complex. We birded briefly at the Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge. A small brackish pond that we hoped would contain some interesting waterfowl was entirely frozen over, except for a tiny patch of open water almost at our feet. As the group stood there discussing next steps, a Virginia Rail came rocketing out and dove into covering reeds. Some of our group had brief but good looks at the bird but most of us missed it. This was another “lifer” for some.

We decided to make Kiptopeake State Park our last stop for serious birding. We drove a little farther north and entered the park which is situated on Chesapeake Bay. We covered the area down by the fishing pier and concrete ships that were scuttled there to create a small harbor. By the time we arrived in late morning the wind had picked up and once again was blowing strongly out of the north. But the water between us and the concrete ships was relatively protected and contained large rafts of many different species of waterfowl. We saw Red-throated and Common Loons, Canvasbacks, Redheads, Common Goldeneye, both scaups, all three scoters, etc. By this time, the wind was really blowing across the open area where we were standing. One of us heard a high thin flight call, turned away from the waterfowl spectacle, and watched two small birds fly in and perch on a wooden railing near us. It seemed impossible but here were our two fervently wished for Snow Buntings! They stayed for five minutes, gave us wonderful looks, and then disappeared as quickly as they had come. At this point our group decided to pack it in. Some wanted lunch. Others headed home. One headed on north toward Chincoteague.



Photo Credit: Ann Van Sant, Snow Bunting



Photo Credit: Ann Van Sant, Snow Geese

After lunch, some of us drove back south on Seaside Road hoping to see something new and trying one last time for the Virginia Rail. During our drive we passed a large field planted in what may have been winter wheat. Grazing in the field were roughly 500 Canada Geese and an estimated 6,000 plus Snow Geese. This enormous flock would occasionally take to the air in response to a passing Bald Eagle. The sight of so many birds in the air at once was visually stunning. The chorus of sound was sublime. This was the perfect way to end an

altogether satisfying trip. Thanks to Jim, Ann, Anne, Roberta, Lynn, Phil, Chris, Lisa, and Matt for making it so!

Postlogue – We did not see a single Northern Gannet!! Where were they? This is the first time I have failed to see them off Virginia during the winter!

Bird List

Snow Goose – 6,000 plus in one flock near Cheriton.
 Canada Goose
 Tundra Swan – Hundreds at back Bay.
 Gadwall
 American Wigeon

American Black Duck – The real McCoy.
 Mallard
 Northern Shoveler
 Canvasback
 Redhead

Greater Scaup
Lesser Scaup
Common Eider – Photographed but not seen by most of the group.
Surf Scoter
White-winged Scoter – Many.
Black Scoter
Long-tailed Duck – Photographed but not seen by most of the group.
Bufflehead
Common Goldeneye
Hooded Merganser

Red-breasted Merganser
Ruddy Duck
Pied-billed Grebe
Horned Grebe – One only; from oceanfront motel.
Rock Pigeon
Mourning Dove
Clapper Rail – Fantastic views.
Virginia Rail
Killdeer
Ruddy Turnstone – One on Island #4; used to be common at restaurant on Island #1.

Sanderling
Purple Sandpiper – Half a dozen on the rocky point of Island #4.
Wilson’s Snipe – One beside tram at Back Bay.
Greater Yellowlegs – 16 at Back Bay.
Ring-billed Gull
Herring Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull – Several at Rudee Inlet.
Great Black-backed Gull
Red-throated Loon
Common Loon
Double-crested Cormorant
Brown Pelican – Only one seen on entire trip; none at Kiptopeake.
American Bittern – A couple.
Least Bittern – Fabulous looks at one at Little Island Park.
Great Blue Heron
Great Egret – One.
Snowy Egret – Several.
Black Vulture – Many at north end of C.B.B.T.
Turkey Vulture
Osprey – A single over Pleasure House Point.

Bald Eagle
Northern Harrier – Only a couple this year.
Sharp-shinned Hawk
Red-shouldered Hawk
Red-tailed Hawk
Red-bellied Woodpecker
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker
Northern Flicker
Pileated Woodpecker
American Kestrel

Peregrine Falcon
Blue Jay
American Crow
Fish Crow
Tree Swallow – Several in very small flocks.
Carolina Chickadee
Tufted Titmouse
Brown-headed Nuthatch
Carolina Wren – One only.
Golden-crowned Kinglet

Ruby-crowned Kinglet
Eastern Bluebird
Hermit Thrush
American Robin
Gray Catbird
Brown Thrasher
Northern Mockingbird
European Starling
Cedar Waxwing
Snow Bunting – Candidate for “Bird of the Trip.” At Kiptopeake for the last month or more. Lucky!!

Yellow-rumped Warbler – As usual, loads of these guys.
Eastern Towhee
Chipping Sparrow
Song Sparrow
Swamp Sparrow
White-throated Sparrow
Dark-eyed Junco
Northern Cardinal
Red-winged Blackbird
Eastern Meadowlark – Spotted during drive to Virginia Beach.

Common Grackle – Very few and no Boat-taileds.
Brown-headed Cowbird