

# Virginia's Eastern Shore Field Trip

## September 13-15, 2019

By Jim Goehring

Seven club members rendezvoused shortly before 7:00 am at the Eastern Shore National Wildlife Refuge to begin our weekend adventure. Some had arrived the night before, slept well, and seemed initially somewhat more alert than those of us who set out from Fredericksburg at 5:00 am. The morning flight of birds across the marsh, particularly the numerous White Ibis, quickly roused us all. Participants included Scott Byrd, Lori Gardner, Jim Goehring, Sally

Knight, Mike Lott, Alan Seitner, and Tim Stamps. Mike Lott organized the weekend trip and served as our leader.

Early morning at the Eastern Shore NWR offered a wonderful start to the trip as the birds awoke and moved about the marsh. We gathered initially at the pond near the canoe launch, and worked our way from there down to the boat



**Early morning flight of White Ibis**  
Photo by Jim Goehring

launch area and back. We were treated to an array of waders, including Great Egret (22), Snowy Egret (3), Great Blue Heron (3), Little Blue Heron (2), Tricolored Heron (5), Green Heron (1), and two juvenile Yellow-crowned Night-Herons, one of which posed obligingly for pictures on a post beside the road. In addition, what seemed like endless groups of White Ibis (236) rose from and flew over the marsh. We heard as well our first Clapper Rail of the trip and enjoyed a Northern Harrier moving low across the marsh in search of food. As always, the stop initiated the weekend on a high note.



**Juvenile Yellow-crowned Night-Heron**  
Photo by Jim Goehring



**Brown Pelican and Laughing Gull**  
Photo by Tim Stamps

At our next stop, Kiptopeke State Park, we explored the fishing pier area, visited the hawk watch, and walked some of the Baywoods trails. Double-crested Cormorants and Brown Pelicans dominated the species seen at the pier. We estimated some 600 plus pelicans, mostly resting atop the concrete fleet that serves as a breakwater out in the bay. A visit to the hawk watch proved both rewarding and informational. The young woman keeping watch noted that the day's overcast skies brought the raptors down lower which made sightings more exciting. In our short stay there, we counted 33 Osprey, 2 Bald Eagles, a Red-tailed Hawk, 2 Northern Harriers,

including a male “gray ghost,” 3 American Kestrels, and 2 Merlin. In addition, a number of large flocks of Bobolinks passed overhead. While there, we were given pointers on distinguishing raptors in flight, and marveled amongst ourselves at the dedication and focus of the hawk watcher, who scanned the skies from dawn to dusk. Near the hawk watch, we also had a close encounter with a very orange-brown colored juvenile Summer Tanager. A subsequent walk through the woods produced a number of warblers: American Redstarts (3), Blackburnian (1), Black-throated Green (1), Black-and-white (4), Magnolia (1), and Common Yellowthroat (3). Returning to the picnic tables, we enjoyed lunch before heading off to our next stop.



**Summer Tanager**  
**Photo by Jim Goehring**

On the advice of two local birders we met at Kiptopeke, we stopped at a barren farm field along nearby Arlington Road and picked up Black-bellied Plovers (4), Semipalmated Plovers (110), a Pectoral Sandpiper, and two American Kestrels. Eurasian Collared-Doves were added along



**Scoping shorebirds along Arlington Road**  
**Photo by Jim Goehring**

Magotha Road on our way to Oyster where we hoped to take advantage of low tide. Unfortunately the prevailing winds pushed the water up against the shore, which submerged the sandbars and forced a change of plans. We moved north to Savage Neck Dunes Natural Area Preserve, where a pleasant walk through its maritime forest, dune, and beach communities offered views of numerous species, including a White-eyed Vireo and various warbler species (American Redstart, Magnolia, and Black-and-white). We rounded out the day with a visit to Willis Wharf where we were rewarded with good views of a Green Heron, three juvenile Yellow-crowned Night-Herons, and seven Ruddy Turnstones.

Before heading to our hotels and dinner in Exmore, we made a final stop at the Brownsville Nature Conservancy Preserve, where we found another juvenile Summer Tanager near the parking lot before an onslaught of hungry mosquitos turned us back from the trail and on to our own dinner.

We got an early start the next morning after a quick hotel breakfast, arriving at Queen Sound Landing on the causeway to Chincoteague at 8 AM. The clearing skies offered a welcome change from yesterday's overcast weather, and the landing furnished a good start to the day. We had good views of two Great Blue Herons, four Clapper Rails, three Spotted Sandpipers, and two fairly well-hidden American Oystercatchers, with fifty or more Tree Swallows passing by overhead. We gathered next at the Chincoteague NWR Visitor Center for a rest stop and added a Northern Flicker, a Red-eyed Vireo, and a Black-billed Cuckoo to our list. While we all saw the cuckoo fly, agreeing that it appeared smaller than the more common



**Ruddy Turnstones at Willis Wharf**  
**Photo by Tim Stamps**



Yellow-billed Cuckoo, only Scott got a clear identifying view of it before it took off. We spent the rest of the day exploring the refuge. We walked the Woodland Trail and visited at various times Black Duck Pool, Swans Cove Pool, Tom's Cove from both the road and the beach, Wildlife Drive, and the Marsh Trail. Shorebird numbers, in general, seemed low, and the Wildlife Drive, in particular, proved unfruitful. We later learned at the Visitor Center that changes were being undertaken in the immediate area of the drive, which left, for now, little water present in the broad interior of the loop. With no water to draw them, birds, as one could predict, were scarce.



**Red-headed Woodpecker**  
Photo by Tim Stamps

The Woodland Trail, which functions now as a paved walking/biking trail, offered nice views of, among other birds, an Eastern Wood-Pewee, a number of Brown-headed Nuthatches, a Yellow-billed Cuckoo, three Red-headed Woodpeckers, a



**Royal Terns with one Common Tern**  
Photo by Jim Goehring

Yellow-throated Warbler, and four Pine Warblers. We next explored Swans Cove Pool and Tom's Cove from the road that passes between them, hoping to locate the Bar-tailed Godwit that had been repeatedly reported in the area.



**Piping Plover**  
Photo by Jim Goehring

While birds were numerous, the Bar-tailed Godwit eluded us. We did spot, among other things, an Osprey, Caspian Terns (3), Royal Terns (125), Forster's Terns (4), Greater Yellowlegs (2), Little Blue Herons (2), Tricolored Herons (2), Black Skimmers (33), Willets (89), Black-bellied Plovers (11), American Oystercatchers (6), a Clapper Rail, and four Marbled Godwits. We next moved down the beach to view Tom's Cove from the other side. The sand flats here between the beach and the cove proved fruitful. While the Bar-tailed Godwit continued to elude us, we located three Marbled Godwits, eleven Black-bellied Plovers, some 300 Sanderlings, 150 Royal Terns, a Forster's Tern, three Common Terns, and a Least Tern. Five Piping Plovers, an endangered species, supplied the highlight of the afternoon.



**Royal Terns with one Caspian Tern**  
Photo by Tim Stamps



**Tricolored Heron**  
Photo by Jim Goehring

After a disappointing visit to the Wildlife Loop and Marsh Trail, we returned to Swan Cove around 5:00 pm and from there back to the beach in search of the Bar-tailed Godwit. While we were again disappointed in that quest, we added at the beach 26 American Oystercatchers, 16 Semipalmated Plovers, 4 Semipalmated Sandpipers, 2 Least Sandpipers, and a single Western



**Clapper Rail**  
Photo by Tim Stamps

Sandpiper. Satisfied with the day's adventure, we left the refuge to return to our rooms. After refreshing ourselves, we gathered again for pizza and beer, and planned the following day. It was agreed that we would visit the marsh between Chincoteague and the refuge at dawn looking for Clapper Rails and then proceed back to Swans Pool Cove and the beach if necessary to try again for the Bar-tailed Godwit. Lori noted that she would have to leave first thing in the morning for home and other responsibilities.



**Black-bellied Plover**  
Photo by Tim Stamps

The following morning, we met before sunrise at the marsh where we were greeted by various species, including Canada Geese (14), Great Egrets (2), Great (1) and Little Blue (7) Herons, a single Tricolored Heron, and two American Oystercatchers. Sunrise over the marsh enhanced the enjoyment of the birds as the colors of the sky and the grasses transformed as the morning advanced. While we neither saw nor heard any sparrows, the Clapper Rails did not disappoint. We heard at least four calling from the marsh and saw two, one of which, a juvenile,

put on quite a show atop a clump of marsh grass. After a fair time spent photographing the rail, we returned for breakfast. After breakfast we headed back to Swans Pool Cove in search of the Bar-tailed Godwit. The same array of shorebirds occupied the sand bars near the Tom's Cove Visitor Center: Royal Terns (75), Caspian Terns (3), Black-bellied Plover (28), Willets (77), Black Skimmers (30), Marbled Godwits (3), Tricolored Herons (2), and Great Egrets (3). Searching through the Godwits and Willets, we enhanced our appreciation of their plumage variations,

noting for example the barred look of the end of one Willet's wings when held in a certain mostly closed position. As we scanned the flock, suddenly the Bar-tailed Godwit stood out. Once found, we had no doubt about its identity, making clear that our puzzling over certain other birds earlier in the trip had more to do with

including Canada Geese (14), Great Egrets (2), Great (1) and Little Blue (7) Herons, a single Tricolored Heron, and two American Oystercatchers. Sunrise over the marsh enhanced the enjoyment of the birds as the colors of the sky and the grasses transformed as the morning advanced. While we neither saw nor heard any sparrows, the Clapper Rails did not disappoint. We heard at least four calling from the marsh and saw two, one of which, a juvenile,

put on quite a show atop a clump of marsh grass. After a fair time spent photographing the rail, we returned for breakfast. After breakfast we headed back to Swans Pool Cove in search of the Bar-tailed Godwit. The same array of shorebirds occupied the sand bars near the Tom's Cove Visitor Center: Royal Terns (75), Caspian Terns (3), Black-bellied Plover (28), Willets (77), Black Skimmers (30), Marbled Godwits (3), Tricolored Herons (2), and Great Egrets (3). Searching through the Godwits and Willets, we enhanced our appreciation of their plumage variations,



**Marbled Godwits at the beach**  
Photo by Tim Stamps



**Success! The Bar-tailed Godwit**  
Photo by Sally Knight



desire than reality. While the bird was distant and moved some within the larger array of shorebirds, Sally managed to obtain a good digiscope photograph for the record. With the quarry found, and after getting a few other birders on the bird, we departed. Scott and Alan had to head directly for home, while the other four of us, Mike, Sally, Tim, and myself, proceeded more slowly down the Eastern Shore enjoying a number of birding stops along the way.

At our first stop, Willis Wharf, the higher tide once again limited our species count. We did, however, add a nice Whimbrel and enjoyed seventy-one Ruddy Turnstones resting on one of



**American Redstart flashing its tail**  
Photo by Tim Stamps

the piers in the harbor. We next moved on to the harbor area and boardwalk at Cape Charles. From the boardwalk, we spotted Brown Pelicans (est. 200), Osprey (4), American Oystercatchers (3), Ruddy Turnstones (5), Royal Terns (2), and Herring, Laughing, and Great Black-backed Gulls. A brief look at an odd sparrow moving in and out among the rocks puzzled us before we determined that it was a rather dull Lark Sparrow, a very nice find for the trip. From the harbor we headed for Cape Charles Natural Area Preserve and its extensive raised boardwalk through the woods. While the walk proved quiet in terms of bird activity, we did

locate a Red-tailed Hawk, and a couple of Pine Warblers and American Redstarts.

While the day was moving on and we still had miles to go to Fredericksburg, we decided to return to Oyster given the lower tides and wind speeds. We were not disappointed, though the most of the shorebirds remained very distant and hard to identify. A walk to the point with scopes produced American Oystercatchers (26), Marbled Godwit (7), Great (7) and Snowy (1) Egrets, Willets (27), a Little Blue Heron, Black-bellied Plovers (3+) and Semipalmated Plovers (6+). There were certainly many more shorebirds present on the distant flats, but identification of them, particularly the peep-sized birds, proved impossible. Satisfied with our efforts, we returned to the car, packed up our scopes, and headed for home.

The ride home, while long, proved as always enjoyable as we spoke among ourselves recalling the weekend's adventure, the various locations visited, and reminisced about the birds seen. About fifteen miles from home, I added one final bird to my trip list, which unfortunately I could not point out to my fellow passengers in time as we sped down the interstate. Sitting in the front passenger seat, I noticed three fairly large swallow like birds flying eastward. As I watched, speculating on their identity, one banked revealing white bands towards the outer edge of its wings – Common Nighthawk! While not part of our Eastern Shore trip list, it proved a nice end of the day for me.



**Many insects (not the mosquitos!) delighted us as well**  
Here a Blue Dasher  
Photo by Tim Stamps



Scott, Sally, Alan, Jim, and Mike  
Photo by Tim Stamps

A total of 97 species were either seen or heard on the trip. The list follows:

Canada Goose	Western Sandpiper
Mallard (or mallard-black hybrids)	Pectoral Sandpiper
Rock Pigeon	Spotted Sandpiper
Eurasian Collared-Dove	Greater Yellowlegs
Mourning Dove	Willet
Yellow-billed Cuckoo	Laughing Gull
Black-billed Cuckoo	Ring-billed Gull
Chimney Swift	Herring Gull
Ruby-throated Hummingbird	Great Black-backed Gull
Clapper Rail	Least Tern
American Oystercatcher	Caspian Tern
Black-bellied Plover	Common Tern
Semipalmated Plover	Forster's Tern
Piping Plover	Royal Tern
Bar-tailed Godwit	Black Skimmer
Marbled Godwit	Double-crested Cormorant
Killdeer	Brown Pelican
Whimbrel	Great Blue Heron
Ruddy Turnstone	Great Egret
Least Sandpiper	Snowy Egret
Sanderling	Little Blue Heron
Semipalmated Sandpiper	Tricolored Heron
	Green Heron

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron  
White Ibis  
Black Vulture  
Turkey Vulture  
Osprey  
Northern Harrier  
Bald Eagle  
Red-shouldered Hawk  
Red-tailed Hawk  
Belted Kingfisher  
Red-headed Woodpecker  
Downy Woodpecker  
Pileated Woodpecker  
Northern Flicker  
American Kestrel  
Merlin  
Eastern Wood-Pewee  
White-eyed Vireo  
Red-eyed Vireo  
Blue Jay  
American Crow  
Fish Crow  
Carolina Chickadee  
Tufted Titmouse  
Tree Swallow  
Barn Swallow

White-breasted Nuthatch  
Brown-headed Nuthatch  
Carolina Wren  
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher  
Eastern Bluebird  
American Robin  
European Starling  
Northern Mockingbird  
Cedar Waxwing  
House Sparrow  
Chipping Sparrow  
Lark Sparrow  
Bobolink  
Red-winged Blackbird  
Common Grackle  
Boat-tailed Grackle  
Black-and-white Warbler  
Common Yellowthroat  
American Redstart  
Magnolia Warbler  
Blackburnian Warbler  
Pine Warbler  
Yellow-throated Warbler  
Black-throated Green Warbler  
Summer Tanager  
Northern Cardinal