

First Landings: Birding Virginia Beach

BY RICK WRIGHT, *WINGING IT* EDITOR

She had arrived a few months earlier, at the end of her first trip out of the cold wilderness waters she had fledged into. Now that it was spring, something stirred her to fly back the way she had come, and the squat, dark duck skimmed low over the waters of the bay, north. If she saw the wooden ship rocking gently at anchor, it was in the same way that she saw the sandy beaches and coastal forests off her left wing: survival required awareness, not discernment, and she continued north, unnoticed and unnoticed.

Harlequin Ducks may be no more common than they were when the first Englishmen landed at Virginia Beach 399 years ago, but today they are among the species eagerly sought by visitors to the area. Birders have discovered not just the world-famous Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel (www.cbtt.com/birding.html; note the new restrictions on access) with its rare waterfowl and gulls, but many other sites around Virginia Beach, all of them offering outstanding birding in historic settings.

First Landing State Park (www.dcr.state.va.us/parks/1stland.htm) preserves priceless testimonies to both human and natural history. The dunes where Newport, Gosnold, and Ratcliff first came ashore in April 1607 border saltmarsh, woods, and cypress swamp, and birders can hike nearly 20 miles of trails for breeding birds including Red-headed Woodpecker, Brown-headed Nuthatch, and Northern Parula; fall migration produces impressive fall-outs of Neotropical migrants. Spring at nearby Back Bay

National Wildlife Refuge (www.fws.gov/backbay/) finds wetlands and woodlands filled with shorebirds and passerines; a few Le Conte's Sparrows regularly winter here, but the great attraction then are the waterfowl, including up to 10,000 Snow Geese.

The central role played by waterfowl in the history of the Chesapeake is attested in the collections of the Atlantic Wildfowl Heritage Museum (www.awhm.org), housed in a historic cottage in Virginia Beach. Among the art and artifacts on display are decoys used by sport and market hunters; the painstakingly accurate efforts of modern carvers sit aside the more primitive products of folk artists from two centuries. The Virginia Marine Science Museum (www.vmsm.com) offers birders the best of both worlds: fascinating exhibits, indoors and out, document the natural and cultural history of the region, while decks and boardwalks give privileged views into the marsh, favored by such wintering ducks as Hooded and Red-breasted Mergansers. The surrounding woods are part of a preserve maintained by the US Navy, and they come alive on summer evenings with the voices of Chuck-will's-widow and three species of owl.

For birders not content to watch from land or even from the Bridge-Tunnel, there are opportunities to take to the water for some pelagic birding. The Marine Science Museum conducts tours from January to September, and the Colonial Inn (www.col-inn.com) offers excellent birding packages that include whale-watching trips off Virginia Beach. Harlequin Duck may remain a rare species here—but it no longer goes unnoticed.

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