



The Yellowthroat

*Voice of the
Oconee Rivers Audubon Society*

April 2012

Vol. 23 No. 4

**Next Meeting:
Thursday, April 5, 7:00 p.m.
Sandy Creek Nature Center**

For the 7:00 p.m. presentation:

White Nose Syndrome in Bats

Dr. Kevin Keel, assistant research scientist in the College of Veterinary Medicine at UGA, will present the April program on "White Nose Syndrome in Bats".

Dr. Keel is a veterinary pathologist conducting research on the causes and symptoms of this fungal disease in North American bats. Since its first discovery in New York caves in 2006, WNS has since spread to kill millions of bats in 16 states and 3 Canadian provinces. *Geomyces destructans* is a cold-loving fungus that thrives in bat hibernacula; it invades the skin and creates a characteristic fuzzy white growth primarily on the muzzle and wings.

Dr. Keel will discuss the history of the disease, how it is affecting bat populations, and the research being conducted by his lab and others on the transmission and prevention of this disease.

Meetings are held...the first Thursday of the month at 7:00 p.m. To get to the Nature Center, take Highway 441, exit # 12, off the north side of the perimeter, go north on 441 approximately one mile, and turn left at the Sandy Creek Nature Center sign displaying this logo:



Go left at the end of this short road. The ENSAT building is a short way down the road on your right.

The Beauty of Plant Habitats in Georgia

summary of March meeting by Liz Conroy

Thanks to Hugh and Carol Nourse who presented a variety of plant habitats throughout Georgia with close-up views of wildflowers in their natural habitats. The photographs were inspiring as well as educational. The Nourses gave tips on how to use morning light and backlighting to best capture the colors and details of these incredible native plants.

Spring Bird Walks (in town) * *by Ed Maiorello*

Bird walks - 8 a.m.-11a.m. or noon. Attendees may leave early. Dress for the weather: sturdy shoes, hat, sunscreen.

Apr. 07 Whitehall Forest

Apr.14 Sandy Creek Nature Center (SCNC)

Apr. 21 State Botanical Garden (Upper Parking Lot)

May 05 SCNC/Cook's Trail Cleanup (Bring a trash bag for picking up litter on the way out while still birding).

Spring Field Trips (out of town) *

Apr. 28 6:00 a.m. Kennesaw Mountain

May 12 7:00 a.m. Charlie Elliott Wildlife Center

May 19 6:00 a.m. Ivy Log Gap Road/Sosebee Cove

* Check listserv announcements for where to meet

Sightings Reported at March Meeting

Feb. 19 - Northern Flicker in Winterville, Kate Mowbray

Feb. 20 - Brown Creeper, Riverbend Parkway, Marianne Happek

Feb. 1 & 28 - Great Horned Owl, (heard) Whitehall Road, Vanessa Lane

Mar. 1 - 41 Sandhill Cranes over Sandy Creek Nature Center, Kate Mowbray

February 2012 Clarke County eBird Sightings Summary *by Richard Hall*

97 species were reported in Clarke Co. during February 2012, compared with 83 in 2011 and 76 in 2010.

This elevated total is in part explained by a phenomenal fallout of ducks at Lake Chapman on 29th, discovered by Mirko Basen following overnight storms.

New county high counts were set for **Bufflehead** (6), **Lesser Scaup** (37), **Redhead** (63), **American Wigeon** (11), **Northern Shoveler** (5) and **Ring-necked Duck** (71), along with the first-of-the-year **Red-breasted Mergansers** (5) and **Ring-billed Gulls** (2). A cold snap on 12th resulted in a new county high count for **Gadwall** (23) at the Oxbow Lake, along with good counts for **American Black Ducks** (6, Oxbow), and **Ruddy Ducks** (62, Lake Chapman) (MB, RH, JN, MZ).

A warm, windy day on 23rd provided ideal conditions for **Sandhill Crane** migration and three flocks, each containing 15 birds, were seen from the South Milledge fields (MB, RH).

The warm weather also resulted in new county early arrival dates being recorded for **Purple Martin** (19th, Sandy Creek Park), **Tree** and **Northern Rough-winged Swallows** (25th, MB, KG, RH, JN), all at Lake Chapman. An impressive count of 1500 **Cedar Waxwings** on the UGA campus on 7th was the highest in recent years (MB). **Purple Finch** and **Pine Siskin** remained extremely scarce this year, with sightings from just two locations for each (RH, BKOG, JW).

Close to Athens, interesting Oconee Co. sightings on 27th included **Bufflehead** reported from two locations (RC, SH, JMS), both **Yellowlegs** at the Plant Science facility, and a continuing **Rusty Blackbird** flock in Harris Shoals Park (RC, SH). In Morgan Co., 3 **Brewer's Blackbirds** continued at the Apalachee Road cattle pond on 25th (RH, JN).

Contributors: Mirko Basen, Rachel Cass, Krista Gridley, Richard Hall, Steve Holzman, James Neves, Bill and Karla O'Grady, John Mark Simmons, Jennifer Wilcox, Marcus Zokan, and the staff of Sandy Creek Park.

Thanks from 2011 ORAS Grant Winner

by Brandon Adams (Oconee County Middle School 6th Grade Social Studies teacher)

I wanted to let you know that Monday I put up four blue bird and four wren houses around the school. I also placed two feeders outside where they can be viewed by students and teachers alike. On Tuesday, I had help from another teacher to place in the ground the pole for the purple martin house. On Wednesday, we had birds starting to come to the feeders. Chipping sparrows and cardinals were seen throughout the day. It was wonderful to have teachers come

up to me and tell me that they were enjoying seeing the birds at the feeders, and that even the students were noticing them. Yesterday, a teacher wanted to know if she could put up a feeder closer to her room. Some teachers have even talked about bringing in binoculars to put in their windows. It is wonderful to see the interest and excitement that this is bringing.

I also entered data from the bird counts from last Friday and Monday into the Great Backyard Bird Count. I printed a copy of the certificate from the website. We are going to put it in the library by the window with the feeder near it.

Thank you and the others at ORAS for making this possible!

It's in the Air *by Connie Mahan (Audubon Policy Office)*

The Environmental Protection Agency is poised to take a bite out of carbon pollution through proposed standards for new coal-fired power plants. With the unlovely name of New Source Performance Standards (NSPS), this draft rule is nevertheless our next best shot at reducing greenhouse gas emissions and slowing climate change.

Leading scientists warn that climate change poses a grave threat to the world's biodiversity. With legislative climate solutions mired in bipartisan gridlock in Congress, this new draft standard offers a way to make progress on one of the biggest polluters of carbon pollution—coal-fired power plants. If this rule goes well, dirty, older plants are next in line for pollution reductions.

Getting comments in to EPA to support this standard is a top priority for Audubon. You can help by sending in the postcard you'll find in the March/April of Audubon Magazine. Look for the snowy owl—one of many birds whose habitat is being impacted by our warming climate. We'll also send chapters a supply of cards—let's get an avalanche of support into EPA to reduce carbon pollution!

Summary Results for the Great Backyard Bird Count *by Vanessa Lane*

Georgia ranked 10 in North America (including Canada) for the most lists submitted. A total of 3,676 checklists were submitted. Georgia ranked 8th for number of species seen, with 194 species spotted, representing 244,931 individual birds!! Red-winged Blackbird (18,633 individuals spotted), Common Grackle (17,090), Cedar Waxwing (17,780), American Robin (16,055), and American Goldfinch (11,699) were the most common species seen in Georgia.

Of North American cities, Atlanta was 4th with number of checklists submitted (363) and Savannah reported the fourth most number of species (156). Check out this map:

<http://gbbc.birdsource.org/gbbcApps/report?cmd=showReport&reportName=StateSummary&state=US-GA>

For more info: <http://gbbc.birdsource.org/gbbcApps/results>

The Imperilment of Georgia's Mussels

by Jason Wisniewski (GA DNR Nongame Conservation Section)

With approximately 125 historically recognized species, Georgia ranks third in North American freshwater mussel diversity, trailing only Alabama (182 species) and Tennessee (132 species). However, great diversity is often coupled with high imperilment and Georgia is no exception. More than 70 percent of Georgia's freshwater mussel species are believed extirpated, extinct, or at risk of extinction. Today, we recognize 84 species as occurring in Georgia's waters. The most frequently cited causes of freshwater mussel declines are river impoundment, sedimentation, and pollution. Each threat has led to the imperilment of Georgia's mussels.

Mussels occurring in Georgia's Atlantic Slope drainages are among our least imperiled species because these river basins are relatively undeveloped and free of impoundments compared to other river basins.

In November 2011, the Altamaha spiny mussel became Georgia's first federally listed mussel on the Atlantic Slope. The Altamaha spiny mussel, endemic to the Altamaha River Basin of Georgia, is one of four spiny mussel species worldwide and one of three North American spiny mussels.

Since 2005, the GA DNR in cooperation with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS), GA Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit, Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources (WSFNR) at UGA, and The Nature Conservancy (TNC) have conducted intensive research on freshwater mussel species in the Altamaha River.

Results of a comprehensive status assessment of these mussels suggest that the Altamaha spiny mussel was indeed extremely rare with only six live individuals being collected from 60 surveyed sites. This study also suggests that the Altamaha arc mussel, also presumed endemic to the Altamaha Basin, was more abundant than previously believed. Additional research initiated in 2008 investigated early life-histories of these species as freshwater mussel larvae must parasitize appropriate host fishes in order to develop into a free-living mussel.

The host for the Altamaha spiny mussel was not determined, but host fishes for several other species were found. Further research into the early life-history of these species is planned and will provide a foundation for all conservation and management actions for the mussels.

In recent years, water quantity has resulted in precipitous declines in mussel populations throughout the Southeastern U.S. While most mussel-water availability conflicts have centered on Lake Lanier and the Apalachicola River, the lower Flint River Basin has experienced ongoing conflicts between water use and mussels since 1999 when record droughts coupled with extensive agricultural water withdrawals resulted in the drying of large reaches of

sensitive streams containing three federally listed species. Drought frequency has intensified with seven of the past 11 years being exceptionally dry. Research partners involved on the Altamaha River shifted focus and began conducting studies to investigate the influences of water withdrawals and drought on mussel distribution, abundance, health, and life-history in the Lower Flint River Basin. Several new host fishes were discovered for three of the five federally listed mussels in the Lower Flint Basin and flow models suggest that the probability of extirpation is heightened with increased water demand. Currently, DNR, USFWS, and TNC are investigating the efficacy of several conservation measures aimed to increased stream flows for mussels during periods of exceptional drought. Among recent highlights from the Lower Flint River Basin was the re-discovery of the Winged spike in 2008, a species that had been presumed extinct since 1958.

Ongoing and pressing issues in the Altamaha and Lower Flint River basins have precluded comprehensive studies in the Upper Coosa River Basin, which once harbored 41 mussel species.

Approximately 50 percent of the mussel species known from the Upper Coosa River Basin are considered critically imperiled. However, researchers from WSFNR have been conducting several contaminant studies with mussels and fishes. Additionally, the U.S. Geological Survey, USFWS, and DNR recently partnered in a project to investigate the potential success of mussel reintroductions into the basin. This investigation will be initiated this spring and will conclude in 2014.

Freshwater mussels are among the most imperiled groups of animals on Earth. Georgia remains a leader in aquatic biodiversity, despite a majority of its mussel species being imperiled. Successful partnerships among dedicated research and conservation organizations have provided the necessary framework to cooperatively protect and restore our mussel species. Over the past eight years, considerable progress has been made toward this goal. However, we still have a long path of conservation ahead of us in order to ensure persistence of freshwater mussels.



Photo of Shinyrayed pocketbook by Jason Wisniewski

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Keeping Up with the Latest ORAS Events and Announcements

by Richard Hall

Breaking news: ORAS is now on Facebook! If you'd like to join, search for Oconee Rivers Audubon or visit us at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/54624820728/> (It's a great way to keep up with what's happening at ORAS).

Dr Karen Porter will present the program on May 3 on "The Tallassee Tract: Conservation in Athens-Clarke County." Athens-Clarke County has the opportunity to acquire 316 acres of land in the northwest of the county known as The Tallassee Tract. It has a mature bottomland forest with extensive canebreaks and virtually no privet. It also has north facing slopes, spring fed streams and an upland holly forest. It is considered a prime birding area.

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The Yellowthroat
Published monthly by the
Oconee Rivers Audubon Society
PO Box 81082
Athens, GA 30608

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