



The Yellowthroat

Voice of the

Oconee Rivers Audubon Society

April 2013

Vol. 24, No. 4

Next Meeting:
Thursday, April 4, 7:00 p.m.
Sandy Creek Nature Center

For the 7:00 p.m. presentation:

Important Bird Areas (IBA)

IBA Coordinator Charlie Muise will discuss the critical reasons for establishing and protecting Important Bird Areas (IBA) and will give an update on the Georgia IBA program.

Items covered in his presentation will include: bird banding at Joe Kurz Wildlife Management Area and Panola Mountain State Park, Barn Owl work, prescribed fires and why these fires are necessary, shorebird work, "Salty Sparrow" work, Bachman's Sparrow and Loggerhead Shrike monitoring.

In addition, his talk will include updates on other issues such as: Brawley Mountain Golden-Winged Warbler management, water gauge area of Chattahoochee National Forest, cats on Jekyll Island, and requests for help from volunteers. Please come with questions and learn the latest news from Charlie Muise regarding the Georgia IBA program.

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 Education & Visitor Center building is a short way down the road on your right.

Spring Bird Walks (in town)

Bird walks are from **8 a.m.-11a.m. or noon**. However, attendees may leave early. Dress for the weather: sturdy shoes, hat, sunscreen. Bring water and snacks if desired. Also, please check ORAS announcements for any changes to this schedule. Directions to each walk location are available at: www.oconeeriversaudubon.org

- Apr. 06: **Sandy Creek Nature Center (SCNC)**
- Apr. 07: **Talassee Highlands (BHL parking lot)***
- Apr. 13: **Whitehall (S. Milledge & Whitehall Rd)**
- Apr. 20: **State Botanical Garden**
- Apr. 28: **ACC Landfill (5700 Lexington Rd)**
- May 04: **SCNC Cook's Trail Clean-up ****

*Meet in Burney-Harris-Lyons Middle School parking lot on Tallassee Road (about three miles from the perimeter).

** Bring a trash bag to help collect any litter along the trail.

Spring Field Trips (out of town)*

Apr. 27 6:00 a.m. **Kennesaw Mountain**

May 11 7:00 a.m. **Charlie Elliott Wildlife Center**

* Check ORAS announcements for info on where to meet.

Birds ARE Dinosaurs!

summary of March meeting by Liz Conroy

Thanks to Dr. Ray Freeman-Lynde for the March program, **Birds ARE Dinosaurs!** He explained how birds evolved from theropods—meat-eating, egg-laying dinosaurs. He described various fossils that show interesting differences from modern birds: long tails without pygostyles, three-fingered hands, and teeth. Protofeathers likely evolved at first for insulation (small, warm-blooded creatures lose heat rapidly), display, brooding of the young and, finally, for flight!

February 2013 Clarke County eBird Sightings Summary *by Richard Hall*

104 species were reported to eBird from Clarke Co. in February 2013, compared with 97 species in 2012 and 83 in 2011.

The most notable sighting was the second county record of Common Goldeneye (2 birds) at Lake Chapman on 22nd (MB, RH). The storm on 22nd downed lots of interesting ducks, including 4 American Wigeon, new county high counts of Redhead (113) and Lesser Scaup (40), and a new early date and high count of Bufflehead (12) (MB, RH, JMS).

Other interesting sightings at Lake Chapman included a new county early date for Red-breasted Merganser on 19th (JH), 6 Ring-billed Gulls and the first returning Purple Martin on 19th (RH), 300 Rusty Blackbirds on 23rd (RH) and 2 Horned Grebes on 28th (RH).

Lake Herrick hosted 6 Lesser Scaup from 24th until month end (MB, RH), and the Oxbow Lake had a good duck assortment including a Gadwall on 2nd (JH), 2 Black Duck on 8th (MB, MJ), 2 Northern Shoveler on 10th (JH, BL), and 6 Lesser Scaup and a female Bufflehead on 23rd (RH).

Interesting sightings from the landfill included the continuing male Painted Bunting (M. OB.), a Loggerhead Shrike on 1st-2nd (JH, SH), 2 Hooded Merganser and a Merlin on 9th (KG, AH), 3 Northern Harrier and a maximum count of 8 White-crowned Sparrows on 16th (RH, BKOG, JW), plus up to 3 Wilson's Snipe and a roosting Barn Owl present throughout (M. OB.).

Other good open country birds included an American Kestrel at the Athens airport on 19th (RH), a Loggerhead Shrike at the S. Milledge Fields on 10th (JH), a Horned Lark on Morton Road on 28th (RH) and 125 American Pipits at the S. Milledge (MF).

The Great Backyard Bird Count yielded lots of interesting species in Athens backyards, including the continuing White-winged Dove (SH), 3 different Rufous Hummingbirds (KG, BKOG), the first-of-season Tree Swallow on 17th (CK), and Fox and White-crowned Sparrows (RH). Red-breasted Nuthatch, Purple Finch and especially Pine Siskins were reported widely, with an amazing 200 siskins in BKOG's backyard representing a new county high count.

Observers: Mirko Basen, Mark Freeman, Krista Gridley, Richard Hall, Jim Hanna, Steve Holland, Steve Holzman, Alison Huff, Mitchell Jarrett, Christine Kozlosky, Bill Lotz, Bill and Karla O'Grady, John Mark Simmons, and John Whigham

Frogs to Find in April & May *by Todd Pierson*

"I have always liked frogs. I liked them since before becoming a zoologist, and nothing I have had to learn about them since has marred the attachment. I like the 'looks' of frogs and their outlook. And especially the way they get together in wet places on warm nights and sing about sex."

Archie Carr

In northern Georgia, the New Year's first heavy rains mark the beginning of the amphibian reproductive season. Hundreds of spotted salamanders (*Ambystoma maculatum*) march across sodden soil to their ephemeral breeding ponds, and the tiny upland chorus frogs (*Pseudacris feriarum*) and spring peepers (*Pseudacris crucifer*) fill the airwaves with their sweet anticipatory songs of spring.

When April rolls around—as temperatures rise and the rains continue—this first bout of reproductive activity grinds to a halt, but the time for a second suite of amphibians is just beginning. The abbreviated trills of the chorus frogs give way to the symphonies of toads and treefrogs.

Some of the most prominent members of these choruses are American toads (*Bufo americanus*) and Fowler's toads (*Bufo fowleri*). While the latter appears to outnumber the former in the Athens area, both species are present in most areas. These close cousins can be a bit confusing to differentiate, but their vocalizations are one way to aid in identification. American toads produce a fast, high-pitched melodic trill that can last for up to 30 seconds, while the call of Fowler's toads is a harsher, whiny 'wa-a-a-a' also lasting for up to half a minute. The eggs of both species are laid in a unique and easily identifiable string, unlike the masses of eggs laid by most anurans.

Toads frequently call from the shore or shallows of ephemeral ponds. In close proximity—but often elevated above the water in low vegetation—are the treefrogs. Athens has four species of 'true treefrogs.' These include the Cope's gray treefrog (*Hyla chrysoscelis*), the bird-voiced treefrog (*Hyla avivoca*), the barking treefrog (*Hyla gratiosa*), and the green treefrog (*Hyla cinerea*). Although each has a slightly different reproductive strategy and phenology, all can be found moving towards and calling from ephemeral ponds in late April and early May.

The Cope's gray treefrog—Athens' most abundant and widespread species—displays a short, high-pitched trill lasting for a much shorter time than that of the toads. The bird-voiced treefrog is aptly named and produces a quick, bird-like whistle. This species is predominately distributed in the Coastal Plain but can be found in a few floodplain ephemeral wetlands in the Athens area. The barking treefrog—the largest native species in the United States—is also appropriately named and repeatedly bellows a dog-like bark, while call of the green treefrog (the state amphibian of Georgia) is a more nasal-sounding, ringing bark.

A peculiar, but familiar, member of the treefrog family is the northern cricket frog (*Acris crepitans*). These small, rough-skinned frogs aren't the great climbers that their relatives are and superficially seem unrelated. They, too, begin breeding around this time of year. Although their call does indeed sound reminiscent of crickets, perhaps they'd be better named the 'marble frog', as their vocalizations sound almost exactly like a shaken bag of marbles.

Representatives of the 'true frogs' (family: Ranidae) can be found breeding through much of the season. Pickerel frogs (*Rana palustris*) and southern leopard frogs (*Rana sphenoccephala*) are some of the early breeders and are displaced later in the year by green frogs (*Rana clamitans*) and bullfrogs (*Rana catesbeiana*).

Green frogs produce a characteristic call that sounds much like a low-pitched banjo-string being plucked, and bullfrogs produce a reverberating, drawn out 'jugggg-o-rum.'

While the aforementioned frogs—all members of the large families Bufonidae, Hylidae, and Ranidae—dominate the spring frog choruses of Athens, I'd be painting an incomplete picture without mentioning two final, peculiar species that masquerade under the name of 'toad.'

The eastern narrow-mouthed toad (*Gastrophryne carolinensis*) is not a true toad, but rather a member of the diverse and widespread family Microhylidae. A quick glance at this small amphibian, and you're not likely to ever confuse it with another species. They're plump, flattened frogs with a pointed nose which they use to grab their preferred meal—ants. Narrow-mouthed toads are summer breeders and produce a whiny, sheep-like 'baaaaaaaa', often from beneath leaves and debris around the flooded ponds in which they lay their eggs.

The final local anuran to watch for is perhaps my favorite. The eastern spadefoot toad (*Scaphiopus holbrookii*), too, is falsely called a toad and actually belongs to the entirely North American family Scaphiopodidae.

While most frogs and toads have an extended breeding period, spadefoot toads cram all of their reproductive effort into a short period. When a perfect, big rainstorm in late April or May arrives and fills up their ephemeral ponds, spadefoot toads emerge en masse from their subterranean refuges, their heads often still covered in silt when they arrive at the ponds. With bugged-out eyes and vertical pupils, spadefoot toads carry an almost extraterrestrial look. Once at their breeding ponds, males attract females with a short, low-pitched 'waaah' moan.

April and May are magical months for amphibians, and it takes little more than a brief rain to stir an ephemeral wetland into a moonlight sonata.

Like they say, April showers bring...frogs!

Tips for Protecting Cats and Wildlife

by Steve Holzman

Recent stories in the news describe how free-roaming cats (whether owned or not) threaten wildlife. Additionally, the KittyCam project at UGA revealed the many risks faced by free-roaming cats. This project only dealt with owned free-roaming animals; the risks for feral cats are far greater.

A feral cat does not have a 'good life' and certainly will not have a 'good death'. Many die from cars, coyotes, diseases, parasite infestation, and other violent and/or painful causes.

Is it humane to let cats die such deaths while they continue killing or maiming our native wildlife? Many who care about animals don't think so. Property owners wanting to address this problem need to know the local laws pertaining to cats. Athens-Clarke, Oconee, Madison and Oglethorpe Counties have 'leash laws' requiring pets (dogs and cats) to be confined to one's yard. Also, they have 'open-admission' shelters and accept any cat you bring them. (But you must confirm the cat was trapped on your property).

In these counties, it's possible to submit a formal complaint about a neighbor's cat or dog using your yard. Include as much detail as possible (dates, time, description of cat, etc.). Be aware that since this is a written complaint, if the Officer serves a citation that is contested, then the person who wrote the complaint must appear in court. Try to talk with your neighbor first to resolve the issue, if that's at all possible.

Do you have feral cats using your yard? You can trap them yourself. In Oconee County, call Animal Control ([706-769-3956](tel:706-769-3956)) to request a cat trap for your property. An officer will come out, set the trap, check it and bring the captured animal back to the shelter. Or, complete a form online for the same services:

<http://www.oconeecounty.com/index.php/application-for-cagetrap-use>

In Madison and Oglethorpe Counties, call the shelter (706-795-2868) and pick up a trap with a \$25 deposit (they keep \$5 as a service charge). You set the trap and bring the animal to the shelter (1888 Colbert-Danielsville Rd, Danielsville, GA). You may also use your own trap.

In Athens-Clarke, visit the cat shelter (150 Buddy Christian Way, call [706-613-3887](tel:706-613-3887)), to pick up a trap for use in your yard. Call Animal Control to get the trapped animal. These counties accept cats trapped in your own trap but prefer the use of their equipment (for greater safety for their officers). These counties don't charge for the service, but please drop off sardines (great feral cat bait) or a donation to keep this service free to the public. Trapping a cat (if it's sociable) may assure it a better life as a wanted pet.

To help wildlife and keep your own cat safe, please keep your cat inside. If you cannot do so, consider a "cat bibb" (www.catgoods.com), or a 'catio' (Google "catio") for outdoor enrichment that's safe for cats and protects wildlife!

Oconee Audubon Society
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Photo of Eastern spadefoot toad by Todd Pierson

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