



The Yellowthroat

*Voice of the
Oconee Rivers Audubon Society*

December 2010

Vol. 21 No. 10

Next Meeting Thursday, December 2, at 7:00 p.m. Sandy Creek Nature Center

Dr. Michael Conroy will talk about "Wildlife Diversity and Conservation in Argentina." He will give a quick description of some of the teaching and research he does in Argentina (much of it bird focused) with photos of wildlife from the Iguazu, Patagonia, and other areas showing the huge diversity of landscapes, habitats, and wildlife.

Dr. Conroy (Mike) is a Senior Research Scientist in the Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources. Last year he retired after 30 years with the USFWS and USGS as a wildlife biologist. He continues to be actively engaged in research and teaching with UGA and as a private consultant. He frequently travels to Latin America, where he is involved in research on birds and other wildlife and conducts workshops on methods for monitoring populations in relation to human impacts and other environmental factors.

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.

Christmas Bird Count: December 18

The local Christmas Bird Count will be Saturday, December 18th. There will be a countdown potluck dinner at Sandy Creek Nature Center at 7:00 pm. Please contact Mary Case (706-548-3848, mecase@uga.edu) or Eugenia Thompson (erobertthom@bellsouth.net) for further information about participating.

History of the Christmas Bird Count

from <http://birds.audubon.org/>

Prior to the turn of the century, people engaged in a holiday tradition known as the Christmas "Side Hunt": They would choose sides and go afield with their guns; whoever brought in the biggest pile of feathered (and furred) quarry won.

Conservation was in its beginning stages around the turn of the 20th century, and many observers and scientists were becoming concerned about declining bird populations. Beginning on Christmas Day 1900, ornithologist Frank Chapman, an early officer in the then budding Audubon Society, proposed a new holiday tradition—a "Christmas Bird Census"—that would count birds in the holidays rather than hunt them.

So began the Christmas Bird Count (CBC), a long-standing program of the National Audubon Society, with over 100 years of citizen science involvement. It is an early-winter bird census, where thousands of volunteers across the US, Canada and many countries in the Western Hemisphere, go out over a 24 hour period to count birds.

Count volunteers follow specified routes through a designated 15-mile (24-km) diameter circle, counting every bird they see or hear all day. It's not just a species tally—all birds are counted all day, giving an indication of the total number of birds in the circle that day.

The data collected by observers over the past century allow researchers, conservation biologists, and interested individuals to study the long-term health and status of bird populations across North America.

Seed Collecting with GA IBA

by Charlie Muise

Here is a chance for you to help the birds and enjoy a few hours with like-minded people in a beautiful place.

The Georgia Important Bird Areas (IBA) program is leading an effort to collect native warm-season grass (NWSG) seeds. We will provide these seeds to The Georgia Department of Natural Resources, whose staff will sow the seeds by hand as part of an effort to restore native grasslands. This will increase important habitat.

This effort will succeed if we have a large number of people help us. Fortunately the work is not difficult, and can be done by nearly any person who can walk across a field of tall grass on the side of a very small hill. It could be a fun family event, or an active social event for a church or scout group. The biggest challenge to most of us will simply be whatever Mother Nature dishes up—there is no shade or facilities nearby.

Conservationists have undertaken restoration efforts in recent years. The IBA has decided to assist DNR because, although they have the facilities to prepare the seeds, DNR does not have enough manpower to collect these seeds, which cannot be harvested by machine.

The seeds we will collect are unique because they are what botanists call “native phenotype,” which means they are not only the species that belong here, but they are actually direct descendants of the plants that were here hundreds of years ago—the plants that our grassland birds evolved with.

When Europeans first arrived, native grasslands were all over what is now the southeastern United States. “I’d say all of Georgia had native grasses,” says Nathan Klaus of Georgia Department of Natural Resources. “That is not to say it was all a grassland, just that anyplace that was somewhat open had the grassy understory, usually from fires. There were numerous smaller glades, probably ranging in size from less than an acre to several hundred acres in size. There were post oak woodlands that graded into oak/pine woodlands (shortleaf in the piedmont, longleaf in the coastal plain), there were open pine woodlands and savannas all over the SE. Much of the longleaf savanna was not wiregrass— about half of it was longleaf bluestem/ Indiangrass woodlands. Sprewell Bluff is the best remainder of that ecosystem.”

As fires were suppressed, other plants took over. Then invasive exotic plants began to out-compete our grasses until they were only able to hang on in pockets. Now, less than 1% of Georgia’s native grasslands survive. The loss of extensive stands of native warm-season grass has resulted in a decline of many species, including Eastern Meadowlarks, Loggerhead Shrikes and many sparrows.

If you can’t make it one of the days we have slated,

there are still ways to help:

- Support efforts to restore habitat with professionally prescribed fire;
- Don’t buy Plume Grass or Blood Grass (also known as Cogon Grass);
- Support habitat restoration by buying a duck stamp or donate to TERN;
- Consider donating time or money to the Georgia Important Bird Area Program
<http://www.atlantaaudubon.org/aaswww/iba/iba.htm>;
- Learn more from the Georgia Botanical Society
<http://www.gabotsoc.org/> and the Georgia Native Plant Society
<http://www.gnps.org/>

For more information, contact Charlie Muise, Georgia Important Bird Areas Coordinator, 678-967-9924, cmmbirds@yahoo.com
<http://www.atlantaaudubon.org/iba/>

Autumn Sightings Summary

by Richard Hall

October saw an impressive 136 species reported to eBird from Clarke County (more species than reported in Clarke in the whole of 2006). Waterfowl highlights from Lake Chapman were new high counts of Blue-winged Teal (54) and American Coot (60), and a lone American Wigeon on 28th. Early in the month raptor migration brought the 2nd and 3rd occurrences of Peregrine Falcon in the county, plus a high-flying Merlin and 2 Broad-winged Hawks over the botanical garden. An adult Bald Eagle soared over Lake Chapman on 16th, and a Northern Harrier appeared in the east of the county on 21st. An American Woodcock was a surprise find at Little Lake Herrick on 17th. Krista Gridley heard an Eastern-Screech Owl in her backyard, while the last Ruby-throated Hummingbird was recorded in O’Grady’s backyard on 17th.

Unusual passerine migrants included 2 Philadelphia Vireos, 3 Sedge Wrens, 3 Red-breasted Nuthatch (evidence of a minor incursion?) and a late Orchard Oriole at Little Lake Herrick on 21st. Noteworthy warblers included two adult male Golden-winged, multiple Nashville, 2 Cape Mays and 1 Wilson’s, but pride of place goes to Joel McNeal’s Mourning Warbler at the botanical garden beaverpond. Remarkably, this skulking bird was relocated twice the following day.

Intensive coverage of the UGA fields on S. Milledge Avenue produced some amazing records. Following sightings of a Dickcissel and multiple Bobolinks, Oct 10th brought the first county record of a Common Ground-Dove (present for one afternoon only). Ten sparrow species were recorded in the hedge along the railroad (or 12 if you count junco and towhee!), the best of which were Lincoln’s, Grasshopper and multiple Vesper and White-crowned.

Don't Mess With Mama Duck, and Watch Where You Put Your Toes

by Tim Homan

Last June Page and I paddled a good portion of the Current River, the longer and larger of the two free-flowing streams at the heart of Missouri's Ozark National Scenic Riverways, a unit in the National Park system. The Current is spring born: a ready-made river billowing up at the gaped base of a bluff—blue at birth and green where its run first pools, clean and trout-water cold. We launched just in time for an early heat wave, and just in time to bird-watch nesting wood warblers in their Sunday-best breeding plumage. We spotted so many pink-legged, tail-bobbing Louisiana waterthrushes along the banks we soon ceased calling them out. Male redstarts, fan-tail flirt burlesque birds, kept us company at every camp. Downstream, where the river widened to floodplain forest, we floated toward a known and anticipated beauty: the prothonotary—a quick flash of bird-gold against green, lemon drops and sunlight transformed into feathers that sing sweet-sweet- sweet.

Every mile, or so it seemed, we paddled past one or more female woodys trailing an elastic line of four to eight ducklings. These lines frequently stretched apart as one or more of the fluffballs fell back out of formation. But the lag-behind ducklings fell back only so far, until they reached that preordained distance of separation decreed by natural selection. Once that self-correcting, MOVE-IT-OR-LOSE-IT! mechanism of the boundary was breached—its spatial deadline invisible to us but a drill sergeant's snarl to them—they skittered back to the mothership and the relative safety of close-order ranks.

On day four, not long after a platter-sized softshell turtle made a memorable, long-legged sprint down from the lip of a high gravel bar, we floated past two more unusual sightings—gifts of happenstance back to back within the same mile. Both occurred on river right, and both involved a great blue heron.

The first incident started innocently enough. The great blue we spooked flew 50 or 60 yards downstream to its landing in a long growth of water willow, the Current's most abundant aquatic plant (herbaceous, only a foot or two of foliage above the surface). As we approached the big wader, we spotted a female woody and her brood of five steaming upstream along the outside edge of the water willow, heading right for the heron. Four of the woodlings dutifully swam in tight, single-file formation directly behind mom. The straggler fifth—the ADD duckling—dawdled a good seven feet behind the fourth.

We turned back to our paddles to attend to a run of fast water just as the gap between ducklings four and

five passed beneath the great blue's bill. After a couple of steering strokes, we heard the wading bird's grating scrawk—that Pleistocene swear word they insist upon uttering when disturbed to flight by some nuisance or another. The heron retched up three curses in quick sequence, louder and much more urgent than usual. So urgent we ignored our track and swiveled our torsos and necks full torque back upriver. To our amazement, the great blue was over the river and 25 feet up, whipping its ponderous wings for all it was worth. Three feet behind and closing like a heat-seeking missile, the female woody was driving the dagger-billed bird away from her maternal fury and vulnerable young.

After a bit of scrambling, we hit the upside-down V entrance to the easy chute, the guiding tongue of quickening water funneling between rocks. Once through, we looked upstream again—no heron, no duck—only a bluff way back and the steady seaward glide of the green river. We both agreed: the female woody's behavior had taught us better than any book that wood duckling—lightly feathered, *al fresco*, *no dente*—is most definitely on the great blue's generalist menu.

Two bends downriver we spotted another great blue heron standing in a basswood, at the first fork in a big branch thirty feet up. As the current swept us closer, the white-crowned wader leaned forward, tensed to lift off, then launched like it had thousands of times before. Only this time something was horribly amiss. This time it was hung up. One or more of its reptilian toes were stuck in some sort of a split between the forking branches. The heron immediately panicked, code red. It flapped and flopped and thrashed leaves as it flailed in its unsuccessful attempt to regain the standing position of its perch. Its outsized wings were suddenly too large and cumbersome to provide straight vertical lift.

As we neared the basswood, instinct bade the heron hush and hold still. With eye-bulging effort, the great blue locked its long legs at an angle well below horizontal, spread its wings full span, and arched its long-necked head forward and upward until the tip of its bill was close to the same plane as its tree-trapped feet. The heron held its pose statue still. It reminded me of a freeze-frame from a great blue's attempt at the arched beginning of a swan dive. But it reminded me more of a giant, gargoyle version of a dove hanging from a Christmas tree. Only this was bug-eyed panic quieted for a moment, not snow-white peace forever waiting to fly.

We discussed the heron's plight—talking bow to stern, stern back to bow—as we paddled downstream. Our responses ranged from an optimistic “he's probably already extricated and eyeballing fluffball ducklings” to the pessimistically macabre “maybe he'll become a skeletal wind chime and clink in the winter wind.”

Pollinators and Integrated Pest Management

summarized by Maggie Nettles

Dr. Marianne Robinette—UGA entomologist and director of UGA's Insect & Bird Natural History: International Service-Learning Program—focused on "Pollinators, Pollination, Beneficials, and Integrated Pest Management" in her talk at the November ORAS meeting.

After reviewing the basic interactions of pollinators and plants, Dr. Robinette talked about the dangers of careless pesticide practices to insects and birds. Then she explained integrated pest management (IPM) as "a holistic program which uses environmental, cultural, physical, biological, and chemical controls to reduce the injury caused by plant pests and diseases."

Only 10% of all flowering plants do not rely on pollinators for pollination, she said, hence the importance of using IPM to avoid unintentional damage to pollinators. She recommended removing individual pests by hand, encouraging native pollinators with diverse plantings, accepting a certain amount of pest activity, and—most important—following directions when using pesticides.

Oconee Rivers Audubon Society

President Vanessa Lane
President@oconeeriversaudubon.org

Vice-President
vp@oconeeriversaudubon.org

Treasurer Eugenia Thompson
treasurer@oconeeriversaudubon.org

Secretary Mary Case
secretary@oconeeriversaudubon.org

The Yellowthroat

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

Submit information to the address above or by e-mail to yellowthroat@oconeeriversaudubon.org. Articles, artwork, notices, and sighting reports welcomed. The deadline for submissions is the first Thursday of each month. All articles and artwork are copyrighted, and all rights are reserved by the authors. Opinions expressed in articles are those of the respective authors and do not necessarily reflect the official views of Oconee Rivers Audubon Society.

Non Profit Org.
U.S. Postage Paid
Athens, GA
Permit No. 41

Return service requested.

Oconee Audubon Society
P.O. Box 81082
Athens, Georgia 30608-1082

