



The Yellowthroat

Voice of the

Oconee Rivers Audubon Society

December 2013

Vol. 24, No. 10

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

For the 7:00 p.m. presentation:

A Voyage to the Falkland Islands

The MS Polar Star was an icebreaker in the Swedish Navy before being converted into an expedition ship. Gary Kochert, a biology professor retired from the University of Georgia, will describe a voyage on the Polar Star from Ushuaia, on the Beagle Channel in Argentina, to the Falkland Islands. He will present photographs of seabirds seen during the cruise and describe the geology and natural history of the Falklands as well as visits to penguin and albatross rookeries.

Kochert taught biology at UGA for 35 years. He traveled extensively in Africa, South America and Southeast Asia in conjunction with research programs on cassava, rice, and peanuts. After retirement he worked as a naturalist on the MS Polar Star and made multiple cruises to the Falkland Islands, South Georgia Island, the Antarctic Peninsula, Cape Horn, the Chilean Fjords, Cape Verde Islands, the Canaries, the Azores, the British Isles, Norway, Svalbard, Iceland, Labrador, and Newfoundland.

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.

Backyard Wildlife Habitat Certification

by Kate Mowbray

The ORAS backyard wildlife habitat certification program continues its outreach work and offers some exciting news: The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens is the first organization to apply to ORAS for the wildlife sanctuary program. Their progress is inspiring, and many people are looking forward to what they develop on their grounds. Their wooded property near Timothy Road is a good area for a wildlife sanctuary. Please email Kate Mowbray kateemowbray@gmail.com for more information.

Christmas Bird Count 2013 *by Mary Case*

Join us for the 114th annual Christmas Bird Count on Saturday December 14, 2013. You don't have to be an expert birder to join one of the 14 groups covering the Athens area. We still need group leaders for two areas: the State Botanical Garden of Georgia and the north side of Athens. Please email Mary Case (mecase@uga.edu) or Eugenia Thompson (erobertthom@bellsouth.net) if interested.

Bombs, Burnings, Bachman's Sparrows

summary of November meeting by Liz Conroy

Thanks to ORAS President Clark Jones for his presentation about the effects of habitat fragmentation on Bachman's Sparrows at Fort Benning, Georgia. He described the Department of Defense as a major player in conservation across the U.S. (even though that's not their primary mission). Also, he explained their use of regular fire intervals to maintain the integrity of pine savannas.

Without these fires, sweet gum and oak trees take over, and Bachman's Sparrows "jump ship." They seek patches of bare ground between grass clumps when choosing nest sites.

Displacement experiments on these birds reveal the importance of connectivity in their habitat areas. Jones recommends the restoration and maintenance of suitable habitat patches to help facilitate colonization by Bachman's Sparrows.

October 2013 Clarke County eBird Sightings Summary *by Clark Jones*

October is always a great time for birding in Athens. Many migrants are still moving through, and winter residents begin to arrive. 140 species were reported to eBird, which is about a dozen short of last year's total for the same month.

Highlights this month included a hybrid American Black Duck x Mallard at Lake Herrick. It was first reported by RH on October 1, and then re-sighted by many later in the month (likely the same bird). As always, the UGA fields and pond east of Milledge Ave. were a great place to see birds including reports of a Virginia Rail (JN), Clay-colored Sparrow (JN, MJ, MB, JMS, JH, RL), Lincoln's Sparrow (JN, JH, TM) and Grasshopper Sparrow (JN, JH, MB). MB and JN saw a Common Ground-dove at the South Milledge Fields.

The State Botanical Garden of Georgia continued to host a very cooperative Yellow-bellied Flycatcher that was photographed and seen by many (AH, JN, JH, RH, PM, JW, KM, JMS, BW, CJ) and continued to visit the same tree for several days along with a Philadelphia Vireo (RH, KM, PM, JH, JN, AH, CJ).

Migrant warblers were present throughout the month including reports of Worm-eating Warbler (JH, RH, MB), Northern Waterthrush (RH), Tennessee Warbler (50+ lists), Nashville Warbler (RH, JH, MB, JN), American Redstart (30 lists), Cape May Warbler (MB, RH, BW, RL), Magnolia Warbler (40+ lists), Bay-breasted Warbler (8 lists), Blackburnian Warbler (MJ, RH, CK, MB), Chestnut-sided Warbler (33 lists), Black-throated Blue Warbler (RH), Palm Warbler (50+ lists), and Black-throated Green Warbler (8 lists).

The last sighting of Yellow-billed Cuckoo for the fall (so far) was reported on 10/20 (JN) and the first sighting of a Golden-crowned Kinglet was reported southwest of Watkinsville on 10/12 (JL). Both of these dates are similar to last year's departure and arrival dates.

The end of the month brought the first sighting of the fall of a vagrant *Selasphorus* species hummingbird to the area (B&KO). Several over-wintering hummers have been seen in the area over the past few years, so it is probably worth keeping your feeders up and fresh throughout the season.

Observers: AH - Alison Huff, B&KO - Bill and Karla O'Grady, BW - Ben Williams, CJ - Clark Jones, CK - Christine Kozlosky, JH - Jim Hanna, JL - Jason Lewis, JMS - John Mark Simmons, JN - James Neeves, JW - John Whigham, KM - Kathy Miller, MB - Mirko Basen, MJ - Mitchell Jarrett, PM - Patty McLean, RH - Richard Hall, RL - R. Lavender, TM - Trey McCuen



Photo of Worm-eating Warbler by Richard Hall, October 9, Athens (in his backyard)

California Condor Recovery

California Condors have been publically released to the wild in the Vermilion Cliffs National Monument in northern Arizona since 1996 to help restore this species to its native habitat. Condors are hatched and reared in captivity at The Peregrine Fund's World Center for Birds of Prey in Boise, Idaho, and transported to Arizona for release to the wild. Condors also come to the release site from the Oregon Zoo, Los Angeles Zoo, and San Diego Zoo Safari Park. The recovery effort is a cooperative program by federal and state wildlife agencies, national parks, and private partners

As of June 30, 2013 there were 71 condors in the wild in northern Arizona and southern Utah. The world's total population of endangered California Condors numbers 431, with more than half of them in the wild in Arizona, Utah, California, and Mexico. The wild California Condor population declined to just 22 individuals in the 1980s when the program was begun to save the species from extinction.



Photo of California Condor by Page Luttrell, October 2013, Arizona

Touring the National Parks during the Government Shut-down—October 2013

by Page Luttrell

Early last summer, Tim Homan and I began making reservations for camping in several western national parks. Before leaving in September, we became aware of a possible government shutdown; nevertheless, we had to leave on our trip before things were resolved, hoping it would not happen. Of course, by the time we arrived in northern Arizona, the partial shutdown had started. Rather than retreat back the nearly 2000 miles we had just driven, we opted to stay at state parks until the national parks re-opened.

We were unable to visit the Grand Canyon and Zion National Parks as planned. However, the Utah governor eventually opened some of the national parks with state money, and we were able to camp in Canyonlands National Park before our trip was over.

As we drove through northern Arizona, we saw our first California Condors at the Navajo Bridge spanning the Colorado River, next to the Vermillion Cliffs where condors had been released. Three individuals were roosting under the bridge at noon, waiting for the thermals to develop. Even though they sported numbered tags, we were still thrilled to see them.

Later, we spotted a true “wild” condor soaring in the canyons of Zion National Park. Because the main highway was a state road, we could drive through the park but were warned at the gate not to stop anywhere. Right. We joined other tourists, driving 15 mph with heads craned out the windows. Of course, we stopped to watch the condor!

Notable western species we saw included Mountain Chickadee, Juniper Titmouse, Stellar’s Jay, Western Scrub Jay, Clark’s Nutcracker, Townsend’s Solitaire, White-throated Swift, and Pygmy Nuthatch. Several times we spotted Blue (Dusky) Grouse along the road; our best view was of a family group of six who nonchalantly crossed in front of us. We also saw three different plumage forms of the Dark-eyed Junco: the gray-backed, Oregon, and pink-sided, sometimes all feeding together.

Our most frequent sighting was the Common Raven. We saw them everywhere, in every park, in every habitat. Ravens served as parking lot attendants, unofficial campground hosts, snack break monitors, and acrobatic entertainers.

Although we have been in juniper/pinyon pine habitat many times in the past, we had never seen any Pinyon Jays. Finally, we saw them in Canyonlands National Park on two occasions, both times right next to the paved roads. They were traveling in flocks of 25 or more, calling as they foraged and leapfrogging over one another as they moved from tree to tree. In his “Essential Field Guide Companion”, Pete Dunne states that they always travel in flocks and often have very large territories of 25 square miles and more.

Message from the President – Christmas Bird Count by Clark Jones

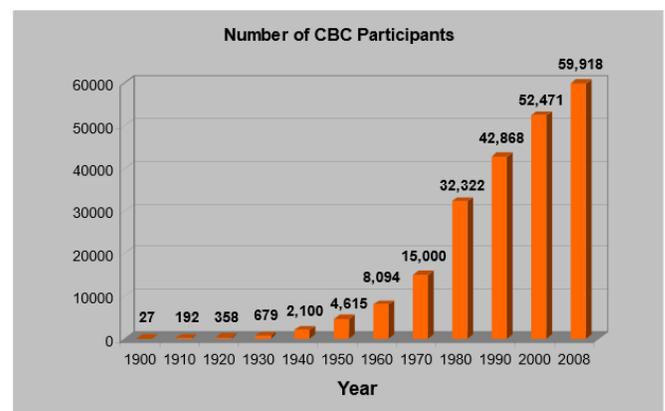
In 1900, ornithologist Frank Chapman proposed to start a "Christmas Bird Census" in response to the Christmas "Side Hunt" which involved shooting as many birds and mammals as possible as part of a traditional holiday competition.

On December 25, 1900, 27 participants held 25 Christmas Bird Counts throughout New England, Canada, and California. Over 18,000 individual birds were counted across 89 species. Since then, the number of annual Christmas Bird Counts has grown to over 2,100 and includes nearly 60,000 participants.

My first Christmas Bird Count took place at the Chaparral Wildlife Management Area in south Texas. Aside from reporting the highest number of Pyrrhuloxias in any Christmas Bird Count that year, I remember meeting many people that I would otherwise never have had the chance to bird with, and I still correspond with many of them today. Christmas Bird Counts can be more than just a survey; they can be an opportunity to meet new people and visit locations that you may not have thought to visit otherwise.

What have we learned from Christmas Bird Counts? Data generated from these counts have been used in over 200 peer-reviewed publications and have revealed the decline of many species that winter in our backyards here in Athens, such as the Rusty Blackbird, and have documented the increase in other non-native species such as the House Finch. It has also been a key resource for delineating and following the changes in species distribution across the United States and Canada. Without the Christmas Bird Count, little would be known about the wintering birds in the United States over the past 113 years.

A unique aspect of the Christmas Bird Count is that it does not require expert observers, and anyone can be involved. If you have never participated in a Christmas Bird Count, now is your chance! If your schedule prevents you from participating in the Athens count this year, find one nearby or participate in one when you travel to visit family. I look forward to seeing everyone on December 14 for the Athens Christmas Bird Count.



Number of Christmas Bird Count (CBC) participants across the U.S.A. and Canada. Source: National Audubon Society.

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Photo of Florida Scrub-Jay by Mike Conroy, Oct. 17, 2013, Jonathan Dickinson State Park

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