



The Yellowthroat

Voice of the

Oconee Rivers Audubon Society

February 2014

Vol. 25, No. 2

Next Meeting:
Thursday, February 6, 7:00 p.m.
Sandy Creek Nature Center

For the 7:00 p.m. presentation:

Orienne Society: Building an Institute for the Conservation of Reptiles and Amphibians in Partnership with UGA

Chris Jenkins, the chief operating officer of The [Orienne Society](#), a nonprofit dedicated to protecting the Eastern Indigo snake, will discuss the society, its work and its move from Clayton to Athens in "The Orienne Society: Building an Institute for the Conservation of Reptiles and Amphibians in Partnership with the University of Georgia."

The society, founded in 2008 to help protect the threatened Eastern Indigo snake, also strives to protect Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnakes, Gopher Tortoises and other imperiled snakes around the world.

In addition to its headquarters, the society manages the Orienne Indigo Snake Preserve along the Ocmulgee River near Lumber City, Ga., and the Orienne Center for Indigo Conservation near Eustis, Fla.

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.

December eBird Summary for Athens and Surrounding Area by Clark Jones

Ninety-eight species from 131 checklists were reported to eBird for Clarke County during December. In 2012, 103 species were reported with 197 checklists submitted that year.

Highlights from December include a persistent American Black Duck X Mallard hybrid at Lake Herrick. A Bald Eagle was reported during count week at the Athens Landfill (RH, MJ, JN). An uncommon Common Ground-Dove was reported along Morton Rd. on 12/17 (JN). On 12/27, MB reported one Sandhill Crane from Sandy Creek Park (SCP).

American Woodcock at the State Botanical Garden (SBG) were sighted (JN, JM, JH) as well as along Government Station Rd. (JMS, JW, JN). Bonaparte's Gulls were reported from SCP on 12/10 and 12/13 (JN). Two Rufous Hummingbirds were present in Athens at two separate locations (RH, KG, DB). Brown Creepers were reported several times throughout the month at four locations including Harris Shoals Park in Watkinsville (JMS), SBG (EM, JM), and Lake Herrick (JN). A late or wintering Black-and-white Warbler was reported on Dearing St. in Athens (MJ). Palm Warblers were also seen at multiple locations including along Government Station Rd. in Watkinsville (JMS), Oconee Veterans Park (RL), Burr Harris Rd. near Watkinsville (JMS), at Rose Creek Dr. and the UGA pastures (MF), and SCP (JH, JN). Vesper Sparrows were reported from Oconee Veterans Park (JMS, JW, JN), Bailey Street in Athens (JM), Oglethorpe County Middle School, UGA Plant (JMS, SH, RC), and near the intersection of Hog Mountain Rd. and Burr Harris Rd. near Watkinsville (RL).

Fox Sparrows also seem to be arriving with sightings coming in from SCP (EM), the UGA Fields East of Milledge Ave. (JM, JN) as well as along Hardigree Bell Rd. near Watkinsville (MF). Purple Finches and Pine Siskins are scarce as of this writing with one sighting of Purple Finch from the Christmas Bird Count at the UGA Fields (JM) and one sighting of Pine Siskin at SBG (EM).

DB-David Blount, JH-Jim Hanna, JL-Jason Lewis, JM-Joel McNeal, JMS-John Mark Simmons, JN-James Neeves, JW-John Whigham, KG-Krista Gridley, MB-Mirko Basen, MF-Mark Freeman, MJ-Mitchell Jarrett, RC-Rachel Cass, RH-Richard Hall, RL-R Lavender, SH-Steve Holzman

2013 Clarke County eBird Sightings Year in Review *by Richard Hall*

As 2013 draws to a close, 213 species have been reported to eBird from Clarke County this year, along with a few others pending acceptance, or that got away. In January, a dazzling adult male Painted Bunting at the landfill raised speculation that it was the returning 'green' youngster seen last March. The same day, news broke of the county's first White-winged Dove frequenting a backyard feeder on the Riverbend Parkway (amazingly, the second county record showed up in an Athens yard in October).

February was memorable for the invasion of the Pine Siskins, with some backyard feeders logging 200 birds at a time.

In March, the sad demise of the College Station Road horse fields had a silver lining, when the first county record of American Golden Plover dropped in to the newly-created mudflat.

April 9th was a red-letter day, when an Upland Sandpiper (the second eBird record for the county) was located on Charlie Bolton Road, but this was soon eclipsed by the incredible discovery of a Long-eared Owl in an Athens backyard, one of just a handful of records in the state.

May highlights were the second eBird records of Willow Flycatcher (S. Milledge fields) and Laughing Gull (Lake Chapman), and the first county eBird record of Black-crowned Night-Heron, also spotted at Lake Chapman from a kayak!

In June and July a Swallow-tailed Kite graced a north Athens neighborhood, while August's highlight was 3 storm-grounded Pectoral Sandpipers (a surprisingly hard species to find in the county) at the newly created pond at Lexington Road park and ride.

September yielded a shy Alder Flycatcher at Little Lake Herrick and a crowd-pleasing Yellow-bellied Flycatcher in the State Botanical Garden, but the unquestionable Bird of the Year was an apparent Tropical Kingbird found by John Whigham in the power line cut on the last day of the month. While this species has a well-documented pattern of northbound movement in the fall (particularly on the U.S. Pacific coast), the identification was made challenging by the bird's stubborn refusal to vocalize, making separation from the closely-related Couch's Kingbird extremely tricky.

Luckily, John's amazing photographs highlight several pro-Tropical features—massive bill, deeply notched tail, and most importantly, the relative lengths of two flight feathers only discernible on the spread wing! If accepted by the state Checklists and Records Committee, this will be the first Georgia record of this range-expanding species.

While most local birders connected with the bird on the afternoon of its discovery, the crowd of searchers from across the state failed to locate the wanderer the following day. The kingbird generated many column inches, with John's photographs gracing the front page of the *Athens Banner-Herald*, and the most recent issue of the American Birding Association's *Birding* magazine!

October is the month when the S. Milledge fields come into their own, and this year they hosted the first eBird record of Virginia Rail and the second county Clay-colored Sparrow.

November was a month of the "ones that got away", when belated reports surfaced of a probable Ash-throated Flycatcher photographed in the State Botanical Garden and a likely Calliope Hummingbird visiting a backyard feeder.

At the time of writing, December's highlights have been unusual Christmas Bird Count Week records of Bald Eagle and Common Ground-Dove, a couple of wintering Rufous Hummingbirds and a lone Sandhill Crane over Lake Chapman, but with a few days remaining until we ring in 2014, I'm crossing my fingers for a surprise. How about an Athens Snowy Owl in this year's unprecedented incursion into the eastern US?



Photo of Tropical Kingbird by John Whigham, September 30, 2013, Athens

How to Observe the Winter Landscape

by Chet Thomas

A fast-paced drama unfolds outside my living room window. I have a direct view of an American Beech tree that's 20 feet from my house. Within two mid-November weeks, the leaves changed from green to yellow streaked with green, to gold with shades of yellow, to gold with spots of brown, and finally, to dull brown.

If I compare this transformation to a typical television drama, the rate of change is very slow. Measured by natural time, however, it is very quick. Those leaves looked the same for several months. Yet now, over the course of a few days, they have changed completely.

The natural landscape typically undergoes rapid change for about a month each spring and fall. The rest of the time, we must look closely to find excitement in our daily landscape. We have to look for the landscape equivalent of the foreign or independent film that develops slowly to reveal the depth of each character and various points of interest in a realistic way.

Unwilling to patiently observe the world outdoors, many of us buy showy, colorful annuals and flowering ornamentals in pots, the "Hollywood blockbusters" of the landscape, to provide excitement in our yards. While there is nothing wrong with this—I often buy them, too—we run the risk of becoming detached from the rich detail of natural cycles taking place around us.

With winter setting in, we must search for new visual and sensory experiences in the landscape. I know from past experience that by late winter the dull brown beech leaves will become lighter and lighter, paper thin by the time new leaves are ready to unfurl in spring. On wet, foggy days, those thin beech leaves are almost translucent in the woodland mist, splotches of light amid the deep, wet colors of the winter forest.

Here's an exercise to help refine your observation skills: Pick a place, a particular view, that you see each day. It can be in your yard, neighborhood, or place of work. Pause when you get there and take a few seconds to look closely. The first few times, you are identifying how the scene is composed: the ground plane, trees, and other vegetation, the presence or absence of water, stones, and structures. Later,

notice how shadows, colors, and shapes change from day to day, at different times of the day, or under different weather conditions.

This works best if you can visit your place on a regular schedule at approximately the same time of day. You'll begin noticing different rates of change occurring with the different elements in your landscape; different characters, plot lines and side stories all interwoven into an ongoing drama played out in front of you. Taking time to watch the winter landscape helps carry us through until spring, when the next season of Hollywood hits arrive.

Athens Christmas Bird Count 2013

by Eugenia Thompson

Despite the chilly, rainy conditions, twenty-seven intrepid Athens birders spent all or much of Saturday, December 14, in the field. Ninety-one different species were seen for a total of 29,386 individual birds.

Think you've been seeing lots of American Robins this winter? They were the highest non-blackbird species with 1,985 counted. Also, an astounding 43 Red-headed Woodpeckers were counted, the highest number in many years (and maybe ever on the Athens Christmas Bird Count). Notable misses were Northern Bobwhite, Wilson's Snipe, Barn Owl, Blue-head Vireo, and Gray Catbird.

Count week birds do not count toward the total but are noted as being present during the three days before and after the count. Wilson's Snipe, Barn Owl, and Blue-headed Vireo were seen in this period as well as Gadwall, Bonaparte's Gull, Bald Eagle, Common Ground-Dove, and possibly Red-breasted Merganser.

For more on the history of the Christmas Bird Count, historical data for Athens, any other count, and this year's results, visit: <http://birds.audubon.org/christmas-bird-count>.

Eco-Haiku by Robert Wyatt

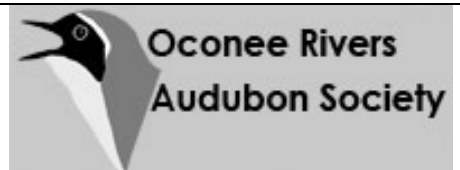
Cattails bend near shore,
lightly rippling the surface.
Great Blue Heron strikes.

Startled to see me,
a brash Belted Kingfisher
flees low over the lake.

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**Photo of Ruby-throated Hummingbird by
Chuck Murphy, Aug. 17, 2011, Jackson County**

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