



The Yellowthroat

Voice of the

Oconee Rivers Audubon Society

February 2017

Vol. 28, No. 2

Next Meeting:
Thursday, February 2, 7:00 p.m.
Sandy Creek Nature Center in Athens

For the 7:00 p.m. presentation:

Songbirds and Their Shifting Breeding Range in Southern Appalachia

Ryan Chitwood and Sam Merker, Master's students at UGA's Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources, will discuss their research regarding migratory songbirds in southern Appalachia. Mounting evidence suggests that climate change is shifting species' ranges poleward, but few studies have attempted to uncover the mechanisms that drive range shifts.

They will discuss two different approaches they are using to address this issue. Chitwood will describe how long-term study of Black-throated Blue Warbler demography has provided key insights into how changes within populations contribute to range shifts. Merker will discuss the experimental approaches he used to pinpoint specific mechanisms that may limit the distribution of Canada Warblers and how these mechanisms may be contributing to shifting ranges.

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.



Photo of Veery feeding on Virginia creeper berries at the State Botanical Garden, by Richard Hall, Clarke County—September, 2016

Animal Voices Film Festival

Monday, February 13, a film about songbirds and their habitat loss, "The Messenger," will be screened on the UGA campus at the Miller Learning Center in room 148. UGA wildlife ecology professor, Dr. Robert Cooper, will introduce the film and lead a discussion. All of the films in this festival are free and open to the public. (See trailer below):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LjQtRr4CKcc>

Great Backyard Bird Count at SCNC

Saturday, February 18, ORAS volunteers will host bird-related activities for visitors from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. at Sandy Creek Nature Center. A bird walk will begin at 9:30 a.m. Binoculars are available or families can bring their own. Count birds in the front yard of SCNC and report your findings. Free and all ages are welcome. Please join us!



Photo of Brandon Coogler volunteering with Park Angels restoration projects, Charleston, South Carolina—July, 2015

New ORAS Intern by *Brandon Coogler*

My name is Brandon Coogler, and I am currently a fifth year senior at the University of Georgia. I am majoring in biology and studying to become a veterinarian in hopes of owning my own clinic. I have always been interested in bird anatomy and physiology and have learned more about them as I have progressed in my academic career.

Last semester I became more interested in learning more about the species of birds that live in and around the Clarke county area. Through this internship I believe that I will be able to learn more about those species and their lifestyles, migration patterns, and nesting habitats. I also hope to learn more about being a part of the Oconee Rivers Audubon Society (ORAS) and become more involved in habitat restoration and outreach activities around the community.

My goals for this semester are to be able to attend bird walks, be able to identify bird species, and become more knowledgeable about how to conserve the habitats that those species need to thrive.

I also hope to become more involved as the semester progresses and to meet the members of ORAS. I am thankful to have the opportunity to be involved in ORAS this semester and hope to gain invaluable experiences and unforgettable memories throughout this semester.

Email: bmcoogler@uga.edu

Gardening in February with Birds in Mind by *Liz Conroy*

February is the month for traditional expressions of love on two days. First on Valentine’s Day and then on another special day—Georgia Arbor Day. This year it’s on Friday, February 17. The third Friday in February is an ideal time to show love for birds and other wildlife by planting trees in our state.

According to the Georgia Forestry Commission, “While National Arbor Day is the third Friday in April, it is too warm at that time of the year to plant trees in Georgia. Trees should be planted between November and mid-March so they will have a better chance of becoming established before the onset of summer heat.” Consider planting trees this month that are native to Georgia.

An extra benefit of this outdoor project is the opportunity to work off all those Valentine’s Day chocolates while seeking potential sites around the yard or at nearby places of worship or schools (after obtaining permission, of course) to plant bird-friendly trees.

Think about how tall and wide the mature tree will be when choosing the planting site. How close will the tree be to a building or other structures when it’s mature? Are there wires above the site? What is under the ground? Call 811 to receive the free service of having the ground marked to show where underground wires or pipes exist. Call several business days in advance to give them plenty of time.

What trees help the birds? According to our friends at the State Botanical Garden of Georgia, there are lovely native trees which provide berries for birds. Yaupon holly (*Ilex vomitoria*), dogwood (*Cornus florida*), junipers (*Juniperus*) all provide berries. Hollies and junipers are evergreen and offer birds protection from winter winds and predators. Other native trees to consider include: crabapple, hawthorn, maple, oak, pine, and serviceberry trees. Choose trees that are drought-tolerant if the area is high and dry. Young oaks survived last year’s drought much better than the young maples I planted in my neighborhood.

J. Sterling Morton, the father of Arbor Day, began the holiday in Nebraska in 1872. As he noted, “Other holidays repose upon the past; Arbor Day proposes for the future.” Consider how birds will need food, nesting places and shelter more than ever in the future as urbanization continues to spread in Georgia and more trees are lost to development. Love birds. Plant trees. February is a great month to do both!

The Backyard Wildlife Sanctuary

Become a Certified Backyard Wildlife Sanctuary Homeowner by providing habitat for birds, wildlife, and native plants in our community!

For more information: www.oconeeriversaudubon.org or email conservation@oconeeriversaudubon.org

Northern Saw-whet Owls in Georgia

summary of the January meeting by Liz Conroy

Thanks to Charlie Muise for his talk on Northern Saw-whet Owls on January 5. Muise, a well-known bird biologist in Georgia, discussed the owl's natural history, conservation issues, and information learned from banding.

The Saw-whet Owl adult is about 90 grams (similar to a robin) which is half the mass of the Eastern Screech-Owl. It has one morph (gray with spots), no ear tufts, and a short tail, while the Screech-Owl has three different morphs, no spots, ear tufts and a relatively longer tail.

Saw-whet Owl habitat is primarily evergreen forests. Loss of habitat is a major conservation issue for them, particularly in migration and in the southern Appalachians. Threats include loss of Fraser fir trees---Balsam woolly adelgids are invasive, wingless insects currently killing many firs, especially the Balsam and Fraser firs---outdoor pets which prey on birds, and "clean" fence lines where protective vegetation has been removed.

Saw-whet Owls prey mostly on moles and voles. These small owls are also opportunistic cavity nesters and will use flicker nests when those are available. They typically lay 4-7 eggs, with the timing very variable based on latitude and altitude. (Right now, Great Horned Owls are sitting on their eggs.)

Saw-whet Owls are difficult to find in winter, and one reason is because they don't respond vocally like the Screech Owls do. Muise noted that during Christmas Bird Counts (CBC) in the North, birders must crawl on their knees and look up into the dense shrubs to find the Saw-whets. He said, "Since these owls are hard to find, they are probably under-reported in CBCs." When audio-luring is used, the Saw-whet Owl spirals around and doesn't come directly toward the sound making it a challenge to get them into nets.

Saw-whets are highly migratory and fly south every year. As an expert bird-bander, Muise sets out mist nets from late October through December to catch, band, and release owls for research purposes. He reminded the audience, "If you see a dead bird, always check for bands!" This reporting of bands provides crucial information to scientists studying birds.

Bird-banding has certain risks, and Muise described how Barred Owls learn to wait for the release of Saw-whets and other birds at banding stations. "When releasing Saw-whets, we don't release them at the same time and the same place," he noted. Once Barred Owls know where a food source is, they will watch and catch the newly released birds "We go to random places to release the banded birds. We do everything we can to protect them."

Why does Muise try to catch Saw-whets? He noted that besides being stubborn, he's concerned that there's little information about these birds, and he's willing to use his banding expertise in Georgia that he developed in Maryland and Tennessee in past years. He pointed out that currently

banding indicates "a presence" but there's much more work to do. He asked for volunteers during November and early December. A volunteer stays up all night just once per season to check the nets. He also relies upon donations and grants to accomplish much of his work. If interested, please email Muise at: cmmbirds@yahoo.com



Photo of Northern Saw-whet Owl, by Charlie Muise, Lamar County, Georgia

David Henry Hardigree Wildlife Sanctuary *by Carole Ludwig*

Before writing about the wildlife sanctuary, I must say something about Vivian Ward (1921-2003) who in 1992 essentially donated the 85 acres on Old Greensboro Highway to the Oconee Rivers Resource Conservation and Development Council to use for education and habitat preservation. Being a veterinarian, I was introduced to Miss Vivian by her numerous cats and dogs. She was small of stature, but large of opinion. Even though she was fragile of body, her mind stayed sharp till the end of her life. My staff and I learned to listen to her sensible approach to animal care. Her love of the farm, its wildlife and habitat prompted her to establish the Polly Hardigree Ward Scholarship for Oconee High Graduates to study natural resources in college.

Currently the property is being managed by Steve and Sharon Scruggs who intend to enlarge on Miss Vivian's view by arranging educational programs on fishing, bird walks, conservation of habitat, hiking, archery, and camping. The grounds have been improved by installing restrooms, a pavilion, and creating nature trails. Volunteers are removing invasive plant species. The property remains similar to when her grandfather, David Henry Hardigree, farmed it.

The sanctuary is open to the public by appointment. For more information: Hardigreewildlifesanctuary.org.

Plants and Pollinators: Sunbirds and Rat's Tails—Looking Down from a High Perch *by Dale Hoyt*

Hummingbirds are not found in the Old World. There the ecological role of nectar feeding specialist is occupied by a group known as sunbirds.

Sunbirds are larger than hummingbirds but have a similar long, slender bill and tongues specialized for slurping up nectar. They, like hummingbirds, are often brilliantly iridescent, especially the males. Instead of hovering, they usually perch when feeding.

The plants that depend on sunbirds for pollination provide perches and have tubular, brightly colored flowers held well above the ground. But in South Africa one plant reverses this arrangement. Its blossoms are grouped together at the base of the flowering stalk on the ground. The naked stalk rises a foot into the air and bears no flowers at its top. This stalk has earned the plant (*Babiana ringens*) its common name: the "Rat's Tail." The Malachite Sunbird (*Nectarinia famosa*) is the plant's most important pollinator.

When gathering nectar, these sunbirds perch on the flower stalk above the blossoms and feed with their heads downward. In this head down position, the sunbird's chest feathers come in contact with the pollen-containing anthers. When finished feeding, the bird flies off carrying a load of pollen that will be transferred to the next flower it visits.

Why has the flower stalk perch been retained? The sunbirds could as easily feed on the flowers from the ground. To see if the perch was important a group of investigators clipped off stalks from some plants and counted the number of Malachite Sunbirds that visited perchless vs. normal plants.

Visitation of perchless plants dropped by 50% compared to plants with perches. Those birds that did visit perchless plants also spent less time feeding from them. These differences in visitations and time spent feeding translated into a significant difference in the number of seeds produced. Plants with perches produced twice as many seeds as perchless plants.

Clearly, there are advantages to retaining a perch. A greater mystery is why the Rat's Tail flowers are positioned at ground level instead of up in the air at the other end of the flowering stalk. The answer is presently unknown, but a speculative suggestion is that blossoms on an elevated stalk may be subject to more grazing by antelopes. That would favor plants with flowers closer to the ground.



Photo of *Babiana ringens* (the Rat's Tail), by Dale Hoyt, Bontebok National Park, South Africa—July 15, 2007

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