



The Yellowthroat

Voice of the

Oconee Rivers Audubon Society

January 2018

Vol. 29, No. 1

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

For the 7:00 p.m. presentation:

**The Important Role of Fire in
Conservation Efforts**

Shan Cammack, Georgia Department of Natural Resources (Georgia DNR) fire safety officer, will discuss fire management in a changing climate at the next monthly meeting of Oconee Rivers Audubon Society.

She plans to discuss prescribed fire management and some of the bigger picture issues and research questions to consider in ecological burning.

Cammack has enjoyed a twenty- year career with the Georgia DNR. She currently serves as the Fire Safety Officer for the Nongame Conservation Section and Georgia DNR representative for the Interagency Burn Team and Georgia Prescribed Fire Council.

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.

**Backyard Wildlife Sanctuary Program
for Homeowners**

Become a Certified Backyard Wildlife Sanctuary Homeowner by providing habitat for birds, wildlife, and native plants in our community! For more information: <http://www.oconeeriversaudubon.org/sanctuary> Or email: oconeeriversaudubonsociety@gmail.com

Green Life Expo in Athens--January 27

Do you want to learn more about environmental organizations and businesses in the Athens area? Exhibits and activities offer opportunities for the public to engage and learn. Come to the Green Life Expo on Saturday, January 27 at the Athens-Clarke County Library—2025 Baxter Street, Athens, 30306. This event is free for all ages and takes place from 10:00 a.m. until 4:00 p.m.



Photo of Yellow-throated Warbler by Patrick Maurice at Phinizy Swamp Nature Park in Richmond County, Georgia—March 11, 2016

“The Rains down in Africa” by *Catie Welch*

Ngulia Safari Lodge, Tsavo West National Park, November 1969:

After a misty and rainy night, staff and visitors woke up to hundreds of dead birds all around the lodge. The birds—all Palearctic migrants—had collided with the building during the night. As fate would allow it, ornithologist David Pearson was present during this phenomenon. His trip to Ngulia was not bird related, but when he saw the dead migratory birds he recognized how special the lodge was and jumped on this great opportunity to study the migratory movements of these species. Every year since then, he and a group of volunteers from all over the world travel to Ngulia to ring the birds passing through that area.

Ngulia Safari Lodge is located within a very important migratory corridor. Being the only structure with lights for many kilometers, it is easy for a migratory bird, which depends on a clear, star-filled sky for navigation, to fly towards the bright lodge lights. This is especially true during poor conditions such as fog or rain. Researchers use this to their advantage and set up mist nets near the lodge during migration. Lights are set away from the lodge to avoid collisions and to coax the birds to land in the bush where the mist nets are hidden.

After dinner, researchers sit on the back veranda of the lodge and watch the sky, waiting for the mist to come in over the valley. Clear nights allow birds to keep flying right by Ngulia so researchers do not open the nets until dawn. Rainy or misty nights cause birds to descend down, and the ringers have a chance at capturing them. On most misty or rainy nights, the ringers are quite successful.

While I was there in November 2016, we had a few days of drier weather. The researchers have been experiencing many more dry days in recent years which they associate with climate change. The wildlife viewing was great during these dry days, but we captured very few migratory birds. Actually, that was helpful because it gave me and the other new volunteers some time to practice for what was to come.

One afternoon, the winds shifted, and moist air came from the southeast. One thunderstorm set it all off, and the rest of our nights in Ngulia were misty and rainy. On any given night, you could stand on the veranda, look up and the lights illuminated thousands of birds descending upon the lodge. On those nights we captured and ringed over 1,600 birds! They were long nights, typically starting around midnight and not finishing until lunchtime, but the ringing station ran like a well-oiled machine.

The excitement of capturing so many birds kept your adrenaline running and there was plenty of tea, coffee, and the occasional Tusker Lager beer to keep you going. Oh, and the species were incredible: Nightingale Thrush (the most numerous captured), Common Whitethroat, European Roller, Common Rock Thrush, Isabelline Shrike, White-throated Robin, Donaldson-Smith’s Nightjar, Barred Warbler, the accidental Eurasian Sparrowhawk (that was

going after the vulnerable, entangled birds), and a rare species in decline because of war and habitat loss in Iraq - the Basra Reed Warbler. The species list goes on and on, especially considering the species not captured but viewed from our seats at the ringing table including a pair of Secretarybird’s hunting snakes in the savannah. It really is an incredible place!

I recommend visiting Ngulia in November and December and witnessing this amazing ringing station in action. And if you find yourself there, watching an afternoon thunderstorm, what a perfect time to listen to the song “Africa” by Toto.



Photo of a female Rock Thrush by Catie Welch at Ngulia Safari Lodge, Kenya—November, 2016



Photo of Donaldson-Smith’s Nightjar by Catie Welch at Ngulia Safari Lodge, Kenya—November, 2016

Athens Area Christmas Bird Count Short Report *by Richard Hall*

The Athens area Christmas Bird Count (CBC) took place on Saturday December 9, 2017. Here is a CBC short report for inspiration (to the tune of “The Twelve Days of Christmas”):

On the second day of Count Week, Lake Chapman gave to meee:

6 Redheads swimming
FIIIIIVE PIED-BILLED GREEEEEEBES
4 (score) Ruddy Ducks
3 Buffleheads
2 Mallards
and a Blackbird very Rustyyyyyyyy



Photo of Rusty Blackbird by Richard Hall, Sandy Creek Park, Clarke County, Georgia—December 14, 2017

Gifts of Inherited Grace *by Tim Homan*

The next time you witness the fast arrowing flight of a duck, praise a raptor: the Peregrine Falcon. The human animal didn’t fall out of its tree-cradle standing straight and tall, armed with a big brain in its head and a spear in one hand and a flaming firebrand in the other. Like us, early ducklike species passed through natural selection’s long and relentless wringer. Waterfowl evolved, in part, from the work of other wills, ones turning the death of ducks into their own continuance. The pruning talons of the peregrine (and probably falconlike forbears now extinct) plucked the slowest ducks out of the gene pool over geologic epochs, a slow and steady field test of survival and death for both duck and falcon.

The peregrine became one of natural selection’s many instruments, a feathered paring knife, that sculpted ducks into today’s streamlined birds with musculatures evolved to

deliver a furious, revved-up flap rate. The faster ducks did some passive paring of their own. They selected for faster peregrines, who, in turn, selected for faster ducks: evolution’s constant thrust and parry, measure and countermeasure, predator and prey honing each other on the same razor strop.

The gifts of inherited grace and guidance insist that shorebirds fly in fast, dense flocks. They instinctively know a Peregrine Falcon won’t enter their birdshot maelstrom of beating wings and hurtling bodies. They also know—in their ancient way of knowing that doesn’t require conscious dialogue—trailing birds invite attack.

The next time you see a flock of shorebirds bend and wheel with the split-second firing of a single synapse, thank the peregrine again for this wonder of precisely coordinated synchrony. This wonder looks like the work of a single will, a kind of collective or mutual mind, but the truth is simpler and only slightly less amazing. Each member of the flock turns with whip-snap quick speed. While our ancestors were still petting their own fur, peregrines were busy culling the stragglers—the slow, the indecisive, the uncoordinated—from the edges of speeding flocks: natural selection’s slow and steady addition by subtraction.

The peregrine and natural selection—a seeing puppet played by a blind marionette—shaped the modern marvel of shorebird flock flight. They are an exquisitely precise drill team. And they should be. Their seemingly perfect turning, timing, and spacing at top speeds are the genetic legacies molded by millions of years of try-outs cut from the team. The shorebirds taloned out of the air became peregrines. Those cuts not only sharpened shorebird flock flight but also insured that the never friendly skies would sharpen them further still.



Photo of Peregrine Falcon by Patrick Maurice at Tallulah Gorge State Park in Habersham County, Georgia—May 28, 2016

Role of Botanic Gardens and Partnership in Plant Conservation in the Changing Landscape of Southeast U.S.

summary of the December meeting by Liz Conroy

Thanks to Jennifer Cruse-Sanders, director of the State Botanical Garden of Georgia (SBG), for her talk on The Role of Botanic Gardens and Partnership in Plant Conservation in the Changing Landscape of the Southeast U.S. She noted that botanic gardens make good partners for conservation and described how important elements at the garden overlap to provide opportunities for partnership including: display gardens and collections, native plants and conservation, and programs for education and training.

Good partnering means working with other gardens, academic institutions, and agencies to educate and assess at-risk species of native plants for protection and propagation.

Cruse-Sanders pointed out the importance of sharing the garden's capacity for plant science and horticulture, because there are limited resources available for conserving plant species. She noted that some authors have gone as far as to state that imbalances in policies treat native plants as second class conservation citizens.

At the SBG, addressing biodiversity conservation, protecting pollinators, and training future generations, are all important challenges. The presentation to the Oconee Rivers Audubon Society on December 7 was focused on how the SBG is addressing the first major challenge: conserving native plant biodiversity in the Southeast U.S.

In November 2016, a special meeting brought together the Georgia Plant Conservation Alliance as well as different gardens, academic institutions and agencies involved in the Southeastern Partners in Plant Conservation. The goal of this meeting was to bring together partners to inform best practices and form a network for rare plant conservation. It was part of the phase II at-risk species assessment in the Southeast U.S.

From 2015-2016, the Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS) organized nine at-risk species assessment workshops to address conservation needs for petitioned and candidate species for listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

Why is this particularly important in this part of the country? Cruse-Sanders explained that in our part of the U.S., we have approximately half of the at-risk species, the majority of which are plants. She added that studies have shown that for threatened and endangered species, "plants are the

majority of species listed under the ESA, yet they receive less than 5% of the funding resources under the ESA."

Other partner groups such as the National Wildlife Refuge Association, Georgia Department of Natural Resources, and USDA Forest Service, valued contact with knowledgeable botanists who shared information about the status of native plants at risk and how to conserve them. The group included 160 people from 20 states and 2 territories (U.S. Virgin Island and Puerto Rico).

Besides bringing partners together to set priorities, gardens are working together to conserve rare plants—such as the smooth purple coneflower, purple pitcher plant, swamp pink, white fringeless orchid, dwarf sumac, and many others.

What are the tools that gardens use in a global strategy for plant conservation? Tools include seed banks, use of controlled fire, herbariums, computerized plant records, teaching, re-introduction of plants and education. It is the botanical gardens employing these tools to help in the ongoing work to protect and save at-risk native plants.

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