



# The Yellowthroat

Voice of the

Oconee Rivers Audubon Society

January 2020

Vol. 31, No.1

**Next Meeting:**  
**Thursday, January 9, 7:00 p.m.**  
**Sandy Creek Nature Center in Athens**

For the 7:00 p.m. presentation:

## **Cerulean Warblers: One of the Species of Highest Conservation Concern**

Gamebird Lab Research Coordinator, Clay Delancey, will discuss conservation of Cerulean Warblers. Cerulean Warblers are disappearing faster than any other species of warbler. They are a species of conservation concern and are also endangered in Indiana. Most research on Cerulean Warblers has focused on breeding biology. This talk, however, focuses on habitat preferences during the post-fledging and nocturnal periods, along with movements made to wintering sites and back to breeding sites.

Clay Delancey is a Research Coordinator at the Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources at UGA. He received an A.S. and B.S. in Wildlife Management from Penn State. He then attended Ball State where he received his M.S. in Biology and conducted graduate research on Cerulean Warblers.

**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.

## **2019 Athens Christmas Bird Count: Inclusive, Entertaining, and Worthwhile**

*by Betsy Kurimo-Beechuk*

The 2019 Athens Christmas Bird Count out at Whitehall Forest on Saturday, December 14 began as a cold, blustery, and threatening-to-rain-at-any-moment morning. Despite these conditions, it still made for a good day of birding.

For the last several years, I've enjoyed going out to Whitehall and participating in a nationwide activity that benefits birds and birders alike. I have always been fortunate to go out with people of all skill levels; sometimes you are the teacher and sometimes the student. I think the inclusivity is one of my favorite aspects about the count. People of all backgrounds and skill levels unite for a common shared interest: birds!

Highlights from our count included: probably the most Pine Warblers I have ever seen at one time gathering on the road, lots of Brown-headed Nuthatches, White-breasted Nuthatches, a Northern Flicker, Red-bellied Woodpeckers, and a few Downy Woodpeckers.

We nabbed some flyover Cedar Waxwings, a lone Hermit Thrush, some chattering Ruby-crowned Kinglets, and towards the end of the count, found a good sparrow patch. Here we got some White-throated Sparrows, Song Sparrows, and lots of Chipping Sparrows.

We had American Goldfinches and Eastern Bluebirds brightening up the count as well. All in all, it wasn't the most species-rich count I have had, but the sheer numbers of each species we did see still made it entertaining and worthwhile.

If you haven't participated in the count before, I encourage you to do so; you never know what you are going to encounter!

## Welcoming Great Egrets: Their Large and Expanding Range *by Robert Wyatt*

So striking a bird is the Great Egret that it was chosen in 1953 as the symbol of the National Audubon Society. Only slightly smaller than the Great Blue Heron, the Great Egret stands 39 inches tall with a 55-inch wingspan. Its size, yellow bill, and black legs, and feet immediately distinguish it from other egrets and herons (see photo).

My wife, Ann Stoneburner, and I are used to seeing these beautiful birds on trips to the Atlantic coast. But this year, we have seen them regularly from mid-July through the end of October near our home in Oconee County. We have observed them in farm and irrigation ponds at more than 12 sites with flocks of 25-50 birds. They are typically spearfishing at the shallow edges of these freshwater impoundments. Their normal prey items include fish, frogs, small reptiles, and amphibians.

We were also surprised to see them, especially early in the morning, stalking about in tall grass meadows. As I walked into one field to observe them more closely, I was overwhelmed by hordes of grasshoppers and quickly concluded that these were the reason the birds were spending time away from water. I watched as the birds darted quickly about, capturing insects in their bills.

Unlike so many species of birds whose numbers have fallen in recent decades, there is no current concern with the numbers of Great Egrets. Estimates of their population in North America exceed 180,000.

They have a large and expanding range worldwide and in both tropical and temperate regions, rating "Least Concern" from the IUCN. This is a remarkable recovery from the late 19th and early 20th centuries when these birds were hunted nearly to extinction to provide decorative plumes for ladies hats!

There is some reason to believe that these birds will become more regular residents in the Piedmont of the Southeast in connection with global warming. Projections provided by the USDA Forest Service's Climate Change Atlas suggest that their breeding range and, possibly, year-round range will include north-central Georgia.

Given that these birds are very adaptable, using either freshwater or saltwater wetlands and tolerating the presence of humans and livestock, it seems likely we will be increasingly able to enjoy their presence.



Great Egret by Marshall Faintich from Rockfish Valley, Virginia—July 2010



Great Egret by Marshall Faintich near Crozet, Virginia—April 2018

## Red-cockaded Woodpeckers: Concerns Raised about Their Future

National Public Radio story includes interview with Larry Carlile (president of Georgia Ornithological Society). He is also acting chief of the Fort Stewart/Hunter Army Airfield Fish and Wildlife branch. He notes, "There are some photos of the day's adventures contained in the link." Please visit: <https://www.wabe.org/on-the-verge-of-a-happy-ending-concerns-raised-about-future-of-rare-southern-bird/>

## **Fijian Finale (Part 4)**

*by Patrick Maurice*

Hawaii, New Zealand (NZ), Australia, and Fiji: four places that I've always wanted to visit. Thanks to UGA's Discover Abroad program, this dream became a reality during my spring semester abroad. Our fourth stop was Fiji.

Fiji is where we experienced the most culture shock compared to the other places we had visited because this time we did a homestay in a small village.

After we landed in Nadi (read as Nandi), we spent a full day there and visited a city marketplace to interact with the locals and learn about the goods they were selling. The next day, we traveled southeast along the coastline to Pacific Harbor and boarded a boat to Beqa (Benga) Island.

After a thirty-minute boat ride through the choppy blue-gray waters of the South Pacific, we arrived at the village of Naiseisei (Nai-so-so). We received a warm welcome full of smiles, music, and laughter. We were also welcomed into their homes and fed an incredible Fijian lunch.

Before we got to the village, we were told that everyone was assigned to a family of the villagers' choosing, and there would be at least two students in a house, so no one would feel uncomfortable. When we arrived, however, some of us (including me) were the only student guest in the house.

At first, I was a little worried, but my anxiety immediately eased after I met Mira, my "house mom." Mira was thoughtful and caring. Her husband, Aeramasee, was the village's mayor! Mira and Aeramasee have three grown children and a couple of grandchildren. It was nice to break bread with them and learn more about their lives and culture.

On our final night in the village, we got to do a formal kava ceremony, where we all dressed up in our sulus (like a skirt). We all sat in the main hall and ate a delicious meal in a circle around the large wooden kava bowl. Kava ceremonies are a non-alcoholic drinking ceremony.

Kava is a starchy plant that grows in Fiji. The roots are unearthed, dried, and then pounded into a powder. The powder is then put in a cloth and placed in a large, hand-carved bowl (called a tanoa). Water is poured in and is flavored by the kava. To drink the kava, a coconut is dipped into the tanoa and then passed to the highest-ranking person in the village. The recipient must drink all of the kava at once and then clap three times with cupped hands. Interestingly, kava is a depressant, so after you drink it, it will numb your tongue and make you sleepy.

Since this is in a birding newsletter, I will note that I did see a few birds around the village: There were exotic Jungle Mynas, Red Avadavats, and Dark-capped Bulbuls around the grounds, but I did find a couple of native species including the beautiful little Orange-breasted Myzomela! After a few more days of fun in Fiji, the program came to an end, and we wistfully boarded our plane back to Los Angeles.



**Orange-breasted Myzomela by Patrick Maurice, Naiseisei, Fiji—March 29, 2019**



**Patrick and Mira by Patrick Maurice, Naiseisei, Fiji—March 27, 2019**



**Red Avadavat by Patrick Maurice, Naiseisei, Fiji—March 26, 2019**

## Message from ORAS President

by Lauren Gingerella

At one point during the most recent Christmas Bird Count, we were trying to find Red-winged Blackbirds. It's a common species we expected to add to our list but it was absent from our survey area. We covered a lot of ground: Lake Herrick, the Oconee River Greenway, and a reliable spot where they are known to roost. My teammate reflected that she could find thousands of blackbirds in Athens a couple decades ago. Now we struggled to find a single bird!

This anecdotal event is a part of a greater problem. Birds are in decline, both in sheer abundance and species diversity. A [recent study](#) published in *Science* (Rosenberg et al. 2019) reports there are three billion fewer birds in North America today when compared to 1970.

Declines are not only limited to rare species and habitat specialists but to widespread and common birds as well. For example, our resident Red-winged Blackbird, one of the most abundant native birds in our region, had declined by over 30% in population between 1966 and 2014 according to the North American Breeding Bird Survey.

Climate change is only making matters worse. A [National Audubon Society report](#) finds that two-thirds of North American birds are at risk of extinction from the effects of climate change.

In Clarke County alone, 12 breeding bird species become highly vulnerable to losing more than half of their current range with a 3°C degree increase in temperature. That temperature rise could occur by 2080. It is a significant threat to Red-headed Woodpeckers, Brown Thrashers, Eastern Towhees, and Pine Warblers, to name just a few.

There is still hope. If we change our current practices and policies to stabilize carbon emissions, then 76% of vulnerable species will be at a lowered risk of extinction. Now, more than ever, it is critically important to be stewards for birds.

We all need to speak up and educate everyone we know about the threats to birds! Tell your family, friends, and neighbors why it's important to reduce home energy consumption and plant native plants in their yard. Ask elected officials to support climate and conservation-friendly incentives, such as a carbon fee or clean energy standards. People won't care if they are unaware, so we need to advocate everywhere and to everyone.



Male Red-winged Blackbird at St. Marks NWR by Patrick Maurice, Wakulla County, Florida—February 19, 2017

## Oconee Rivers Audubon Society

**President** Lauren Gingerella  
President@oconeeriversaudubon.org

**Vice—President** Sam Merker  
vp@oconeeriversaudubon.org

**Treasurer** Alison Huff  
treasurer@oconeeriversaudubon.org

**Secretary** Eugenia Thompson  
secretary@oconeeriversaudubon.org

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

Submit items to address above or e—mail *The Yellowthroat* editor Liz Conroy: [yellowthroat@oconeeriversaudubon.org](mailto:yellowthroat@oconeeriversaudubon.org) Articles, photos, notices, and sighting reports welcomed. The deadline for submissions is the first day 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.