



# The Yellowthroat

*Voice of the  
Oconee Rivers Audubon Society*

June 2011

Vol. 22 No. 6

## Next Meeting Thursday, June 2, 6:00 p.m. Memorial Park Annual June Potluck Picnic

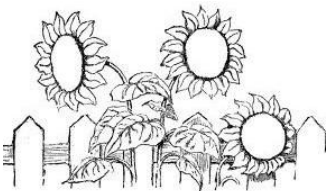
**O**ur Potluck Picnic will take place at Memorial Park, picnic shelter number 1, beginning at 6:00 p.m. Please note the time change and the location change.

Bring a dish of your favorite recipe, and join us for an evening of socializing in the outdoors!

Election of Officers for the upcoming year will also take place during the June meeting. Following is the list of nominees:

- TBA, President
- TBA, Vice-President
- Mary Case, Secretary
- Eugenia Thompson, Treasurer

To reach Memorial Park, go south on South Milledge Avenue, pass Lumpkin Street, and turn right on Gran Ellen Drive. Memorial Park will be on your left. The shelters are immediately to your left, down the hill.



## The Backyard Wildlife Sanctuary Corner

*by Robin Woodroof*

**W**e are pleased to announce that Leon Galis has been certified as having the first ORAS backyard wildlife sanctuary in the Athens area!

We would like to thank Leon for helping bring the backyard program to Athens. It was most fitting that his backyard was the first to be certified.

Congratulations Leon!

## See You in September!

**I**n September, ORAS will be meeting on our usual first Thursday of each month at our regular place at Sandy Creek Nature Center. While we don't meet in July and August, you can stay current on bird sightings at the message board listed on our webpage: <http://www.oconeeriversaudubon.org/>

## Is the Gulf of Mexico Back to Normal?

*summarized by Eugenia Thompson*

**M**edia attention to the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico has faded, but research on its impact is still going on. At the May ORAS meeting, Dr. Melitza Crespo-Medina, Post-Doctoral Associate of the UGA Department of Marine Sciences Joye Research Group, spoke on "The Impact of the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill on Microbial Community Composition and Dynamics." The UGA research team has been on three expeditions to the Gulf.

More than 1,000 small, slow, cold seeps of mostly oil and methane occur naturally in fissures in the Gulf of Mexico; although only limited studies have been done on them, they are known to support a diverse and unique fauna. Altogether they discharge about 400 barrels of oil per day (bopd). When the Deepwater Horizon exploded and sank in April, 2010, there began an unprecedented discharge of 60,000-80,000 bopd. Independent scientists first arrived on the site on May 5, 2010, and began to study what was happening.

The research goals of the UGA team were to study 1) the deep sea hydrocarbon plumes which were mainly gas, 2) the fate of the oil sediment, and 3) the impact on the benthic macro fauna and the microbial community.

The underwater plumes were found to have high carbon dioxide levels and decreased levels of oxygen. (Based on reliable estimates, up to 500,000 tonnes of these hydrocarbons were released.) Methane oxidation rates were elevated and reached a peak in May/June; by Nov./Dec. , they were much lower but still high enough to be of concern. Methanotrophs, organisms that oxidize methane, increased greatly.

As surface oil breaks down in various ways, some of it sinks to the bottom. Sediment samples of weathered oil on the sea floor in Aug./Sept. looked oily, smelled oily, and contained no live fauna.

The impact on the benthos, life forms on the bottom of the sea, was extensive: Tubeworms were only tubes, no worms. Shells of pteropods were found with no living organisms in them. Crabs had spots on their shells which indicated exposure to oil. And the coral was dead. Much of the filter feeding fauna was eliminated; it is not known how long it will take it to recover.

The UGA team will return to the Gulf in July to continue their study of the microbial activity and communities.

## A Beautiful Day of Birds

by Tim Homan

*continued from the May issue*

**Everglades National Park.** Noticing that Page was harnessed to her binoculars, the thick-bearded guide repaid our patience with a tip before the group finally left. “Paddle further down this side of the bay, tuck your canoe in the mangroves just outside the entrance to the creek before dusk, and watch the show.”

We did as he instructed. After supper we paddled past some of Cannon Bay’s largest islands to the creek, Gopher Key, the one we were planning to explore on our layover day starting the next morning. We tied our painters to prop roots. Ate another dessert and waited. The show began with a mixed bag of little blues, tricolors, and snowys flying hard and fast right down the pipe of the creek’s mangrove tunnel, exiting the protected part of their route right in front of us at nearly eye level. After several more of these mixed flocks of 12- to 30-birds barreled by, the first white ibis-only line undulated up and over the mangroves bordering the other side of Gopher Key’s narrow mouth.

The show was on. Flock after flock of waders followed a groove over the mangroves or surged out of the creek’s mouth. Too many birds, not enough eyes. A birder stimulus package, the only deficit our inability to see everything at once.

The creek crooked to the left for the flyers immediately before it opened to the bay. The small waders slowed slightly as they banked high into the curve before making a gravity-whipped dive that pitched them out of the creek low and fast. Occasionally, a snowy-only flock of 10- to 18-golden-slipped birds brought involuntary murmurs of appreciation as they passed in review trailing their reflections. Their startling bursts of white were luminous against the darkening mangrove and glades water. Their witching-hour white was so intense, so seemingly self generated, that a few lumens of earlier light must have disobeyed the bounds of physics to catch a joyride on their feathers.

The ibis flowed in a broken stream, dots of five to dashes of fifty coming one after another. Tall mangrove picketed the other side of the creek’s mouth. Line after line of ibis in single-file formation hurdled the last and tallest rank of mangroves in a fluid curl, a living rollercoaster arcing up and over the obstacle with unerring synchrony and grace. When we turned to look, we could still see the dim wavering lines of the white waders on their way to an island roost.

The incoming tide of waders ebbed as a darker shade of dusk filled the creek’s mouth. I finally convinced Page that we should be at least as smart as a bird and paddle back to our dry-land roost before the large islands became black walls indistinguishable from the real shoreline. That night barred owls inquired into each other’s cooking arrangements while a solitary screech owl claimed the high land of Darwin’s Place with his long, quavering whistles.

The next morning, while we ate oatmeal close beside the water, three dolphins streaked through the narrow channel between camp and the long island on the other side. They didn’t arch and roll in single file like we had witnessed many times before in the ocean. These three swam side by side straight, fast, and just below the surface like three short, chunky torpedoes. A lone dolphin swept by at the same speed, probably no more than 30 seconds behind the others. A few minutes later, the trio

charged back the other way (we assumed they were the same ones), their powerful bodies and prominent foreheads pillowing up impressive wakes as before.

We entered Gopher Key Creek while it was still dark and gloomy with mangrove shade. At this end the stream was often not as wide as our canoe was long. We passed our first big bird—light brown and chunky and stolidly still, an immature black-crowned night-heron—within the first hundred yards. We would see immature night-herons all day, frequently one or more always in plain sight. Reluctant to fly, green herons calmly strode up prop roots before tucking themselves further away behind an evergreen shield of leaves. Small waders, the same ones the creek had disgorged the evening before, flew ahead of the canoe and quickly disappeared around a bend.

The steadily widening tidal stream—flowing back and forth to gravity’s scheduled tether—links a chain of small unnamed lakes and three larger bodies of water, invariably called bays in the Everglades. Each lake and bay held a bonanza of big birds, one or more sunbathing gators, and a seemingly limitless supply of leaping fish. We focused our binoculars on by far the largest aggregation of pied-billed grebes, over fifty, that we had ever seen in the first small lake we paddled across. Double-crested cormorants dove in the deeper water; brown pelicans loafed atop low, densely branched trees, perhaps tired from night fishing. Waders from great egrets to little blues to great blues skulked and squawked everywhere. Kingfishers ratcheted from perch to perch.

When we canoed close to shore we heard the mews from unseen catbirds and the emphatic entreaties to Page for quick beer from the white-eyed vireos. Phoebes, yellow-rumped warblers, and blue-gray gnatcatchers—who we hoped were lumpers and would consider mosquitoes a kind of large gnat—were characteristically unwary and common.

In Gopher Key Bay, we spotted several more red-shouldered hawks still-hunting the ecotone along the shoreline. We saw the first ospreys of the day fly by with their long, elbowed wings. White ibis noodled the shallows, up and down like miniature derricks. Wood storks waded the low-tide water, looking for the right place to employ the spring-loaded chopsticks of their huge bills. The morning’s first bald eagle coasted high above us on set, hang-glider wings that made those of the turkey vultures well below it look stumpy in comparison.

We entered Rookery Bay, our last one, well after lunch. A big Cooper’s hawk, a female, busted across a small corner of the bay, her movements muscular and overtly aggressive on the hunt. Overhead, small flocks of pelicans spiraled effortlessly on thermals and the span of their 9-foot wings, undersides brilliant white against the all blue dome of the sky. We stopped paddling and flipped through our bird books. A quick check verified an “I bet” statement: white pelicans are the only nonpelagic birds on this side of the United States, summer or winter, whose wingspan can easily best the widest stretch of the bald eagle.

After binocular-gawking at shorebirds, gulls, and terns through the narrow side of Rookery, we entered the much wider and shallower side of the bay, its far shore opening to view still more than half a mile away. Five white pelicans floated in the furthest corner. The uncanny distortion of distance that turns house cats into cougars made them look big as small sailboats in the flat landscape. We paddled on; the pelicans shrunk to normal proportions. Six or seven roseate spoonbills, our last new waders of the day, stirred the shallow-water soup side to side a few feet out from the low-tide muck.

Time turned us back from Rookery toward a slow paddle to camp and supper. We returned to watch a rerun of yesterday's show, the after-dinner theater end to a beautiful day of birds. A day of perfect paddling weather, and perfect solitude in a truly large and wild landscape. The day, which we belatedly realized was Christmas Eve, was our finest ever for birding afloat in the field, a balm against physical injury and the heavy winds and cold weather bearing down upon us from the north.

## Twinkle, Twinkle Backyard Firefly

by Robin Woodroof

When I was little, I used to love watching fireflies on warm summer nights, catching them in my hands, and of course putting them in a jar and being mesmerized by them just a little while longer before releasing them to continue on their journey. As I grew up, I saw fewer and fewer fireflies each year until eventually I didn't see any. They were all but gone from my hometown and still are except for occasional sightings outside the city limits. Later, I learned that it was probably large trucks spraying for mosquitoes throughout neighborhoods that wiped out the firefly populations. Although the spraying stopped happening years ago, the fireflies haven't returned. The pesticides in addition to habitat loss, light pollution, and development have all contributed to this loss.

When I moved to Athens and saw fireflies in my backyard, I was overjoyed. It had been so long since I had seen them, and I could not stop smiling. I sat outside every night just to watch their magical flight once again. Now, I eagerly await their return each spring.

### How to Provide the Right Habitat for Fireflies in Your Backyard:

- **Provide Trees and Shrubs**-at night they crawl up grass blades and fly into tree branches to signal for mates. Often the male will fly, while females wait in trees, shrubs and grasses to spot an attractive male.
- **Plant Tall Grasses or Don't Over-Mow the Lawn**-they spend most of their day on the ground and in tall grass which keeps them cool, conceals them, and gives them a good location for signaling at night.
- **Leave Tree Limbs and Leaves on the Ground**-they provide food for firefly larvae.
- **Provide Fresh Water**-crucial to firefly populations because they thrive in humid, warm environments and even small amounts can meet their needs during mating season.
- **Reduce Light Pollution**-turn off outside lights at night because they can interfere with firefly flashing to attract mates, defend territory, attract prey, and warn off predators.
- **Avoid using Chemical Pesticides and Fertilizers**-they can kill fireflies and their prey.

### Fun Facts:

Fireflies or Lightning Bugs are actually winged beetles. 2000 species are found on most continents and each has a unique luminous pattern.

In the U.S., fireflies mostly live east of Kansas.

Fireflies lay their eggs in the ground.

Larvae feed on worms, snails, and slugs that live under logs and in leaf litter.

Larvae hibernate over the winter.

Adults probably feed on nectar, pollen, insects, or eat nothing due to a short life span.

Adult life spans only last a few weeks to 2 months.

Fireflies taste nasty to predators.

Fireflies are medically and scientifically useful.

Fireflies provide the most efficient lights in the world-100% of their energy is emitted as light instead of heat.

References used: <http://iris.biosci.ohio-state.edu/projects/FFiles/frfact.html> ;

<http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/bugs/firefly/> ;

<http://www.firefly.org/>

## April 2011 Clarke eBird Summary

by Richard Hall

**159** species were reported to eBird in April 2011, compared with 150 in 2010 and 135 in 2009. The month was notable for an unprecedented influx of rare herons. Lake Herrick had the lion's share, with the continuing adult Little Blue Heron until 3<sup>rd</sup>, 10 flyover Cattle Egrets and a Great Egret on 20<sup>th</sup>, in addition to the usual Green and Great Blue Herons. Two American Bitterns were present in the beaverpond wetland in the Botanical Garden on 5<sup>th</sup>, arriving just a few days ahead of last year's bird. Two Yellow-crowned Night-Herons flying over Coile cemetery on 17<sup>th</sup> were most unexpected. Also noteworthy was how early migration peaked this year, with new county early dates set for the following species: Prothonotary Warbler on 3<sup>rd</sup>, Kentucky Warbler on 4<sup>th</sup>, Scarlet Tanager on 7<sup>th</sup>, Cape May and Cerulean Warbler on 9<sup>th</sup>, Orchard Oriole on 10<sup>th</sup>, Yellow-billed Cuckoo on 11<sup>th</sup>, Northern Waterthrush on 13<sup>th</sup>, Acadian Flycatcher and Blackpoll Warbler on 15<sup>th</sup> and Mississippi Kite on 21<sup>st</sup>.

The Botanical Garden had a good run of raptors, with 2 Bald Eagles soaring together on 25<sup>th</sup>, two records each of Northern Harrier and Merlin, and a Peregrine on 13<sup>th</sup>. A lone flyover Sandhill Crane was seen on the late date of 2<sup>nd</sup>. Notable passerine sightings here included a new county high count of 5 Orange-crowned Warblers on 17<sup>th</sup>, a singing Tennessee Warbler on 20<sup>th</sup>, a Bay-breasted Warbler on 26<sup>th</sup>, and 1-2 Swainson's Warblers on territory across the river. Nearby, the south Milledge fields hosted a Lincoln's Sparrow from 20<sup>th</sup>-25<sup>th</sup>, and a new eBird county high count of 50 Bobolinks.

Interesting sightings at Lake Chapman included the first documented county record of Forster's Tern on 21<sup>st</sup>, Vesper Sparrows and Bonaparte's Gulls on 3<sup>rd</sup>, a Cliff Swallow on 5<sup>th</sup> and individual Red-breasted Mergansers on 16<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup>. 3 Common Loons flew over Lake Herrick on 10<sup>th</sup>. Towards the end of the month Spotted and Solitary Sandpipers were being seen daily, peaking at 8 and 2 respectively on 28<sup>th</sup>. A very confiding Wilson's Snipe gave many people their best ever looks between 4<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup>. The only other shorebirds seen were a Lesser Yellowlegs on 22<sup>nd</sup> and a Least Sandpiper on 29<sup>th</sup>.

A singing Grasshopper Sparrow at the junction of Voyles and Old Elberton Roads on 20<sup>th</sup> gives hope that the species may try to breed locally. Yard watchers enjoyed the presence of lingering Pine Siskins until the end of the month. Outside of Clarke County, good birds found in the Bostwick area included an American Golden-Plover and a maximum of 5 Upland Sandpipers, in addition to the long-staying blue-phase Snow Goose.

## It's Our Birthday

by Eugenia Thompson

Athens has had an active birding community for decades, if not longer, but apparently no one saw the need, or wanted to go to the trouble, to establish a chapter of the National Audubon Society here for a long time. Then an avid young birder, Mark "Komo" Komoroski, came here as a graduate student in the Institute of Ecology. When he found no Audubon chapter here, he, with the confidence of youth, contacted National Audubon and began the process to form a chapter. At that time, one of National's requirements for starting a new chapter was to recruit a certain number of new National Audubon members before the chapter could be chartered. Although this was a hard task, Komo persevered and finally, in April 1991, he held the first Oconee Audubon Society meeting.

Pretty soon some of the rest of us in the birding community heard about this group that had started up. We started attending the meetings and began volunteering for positions in the group. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Volunteers started the chapter and volunteers have managed it for twenty years. We can always use more volunteers. If you have the desire to help out, we have a place for you; contact any of the officers or board members, or just ask around at meetings – someone will point you in the right direction.

## Oconee Rivers Audubon Society

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