



# The Yellowthroat

Voice of the

Oconee Rivers Audubon Society

June/July 2018

Vol. 29, No. 6

## Next Meeting: Thursday, June 7, 6:00 p.m. Annual Potluck Picnic at Memorial Park

Our Potluck Picnic begins at 6:00 p.m. at Memorial Park in picnic shelter number 1. Bring a covered dish and enjoy an evening of socializing. The Election of Officers for the upcoming year will also take place.

Following is the list of nominees:

- Catie Welch, President
- Sam Merker, Vice-President
- Eugenia Thompson, Secretary
- Alison Huff, 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. Drive slowly and be sure to bring binoculars to check out the birds in the area.

Please note that this is our last general meeting until Thursday, September 6. Topic and speaker to be announced. Save that date and watch for *The Yellowthroat* in August. Also, to read the newsletter online, please use this link: (<http://oconeeriversaudubon.org/newsletters>)

**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. Bear right on the road to the parking lot and the Education and Visitor Center.

## When a Rail Steals the Show

by Patrick Maurice

My mother (Kris Bisgard), Dan Vickers, and I woke up in Savannah, Georgia before dawn to bird the saltmarsh near Fort Pulaski National Monument. We were there to look for the aptly named Saltmarsh Sparrow, a species that breeds in the coastal areas of New England and winters farther south along the Atlantic. The best time to find these secretive sparrows is around high tide when they are pushed up to higher spots and closer to the road.

It was a cool December morning, but the temperature was a lot milder here than back in Atlanta. As the temperature rose with the sun, we were walking East along the road and heard a loud “kek, kek, kek” call that increased in tempo and we immediately recognized as a Clapper Rail. We spotted the bird in the marsh only a few yards away from us. The rail was pretty much completely in the open and gave us very nice views and photo-ops. The sound was almost deafening, and you could actually see steam emanating from the rail’s mouth! We found the sparrows later, but the rail stole the show that morning.



Photo of Clapper Rail by Patrick Maurice,  
Lazaretto Creek Boat Ramp in Chatham County,  
Georgia—December 12, 2015

## **My First Rail** by Karla O'Grady

When I moved from Cincinnati, Ohio, to Stamford, Connecticut, I fell in love with the marshes, and I spent my free time wandering the marshes. One day I ran into a would-be photographer. While we were talking about how I came to birding, and how he got into photography, a peculiar bird came out of the marsh, swam across a rivulet and marched right between the two of us like we were reeds and then into the marsh behind us.

“What kind of a bird was that?” my new friend asked me. “I have no idea,” I replied. “It was kind of a cross between a chicken and a rabbit.”

When I got home I looked the bird up in my field guide and decided it was a Clapper Rail. There was a naturalist based at this marsh, and when I told her what happened, she insisted that Rails can't swim. I insisted that I had seen it swim, but she pooh-poohed what I said.

The following weekend, my husband Bill and I went to Milford Point in Connecticut. We were working on identifying sparrows when two women offered to help us. I mentioned my rail experience to them, and one of the women said, “Dr. Sibley is out there removing invasive plants. Let's go ask him.”

We did and Dr. Fred Sibley informed us that while rails don't love swimming the way that ducks do, they will swim to get from one place to another. This is exactly what this rail was doing. I could hardly wait to tell the naturalist!

## **Do You Know These Rail Habits?**

David Allen Sibley (son of Dr. Fred Sibley) includes interesting facts about the habits of rails in his book *The Sibley Guide to Birds*. He notes:

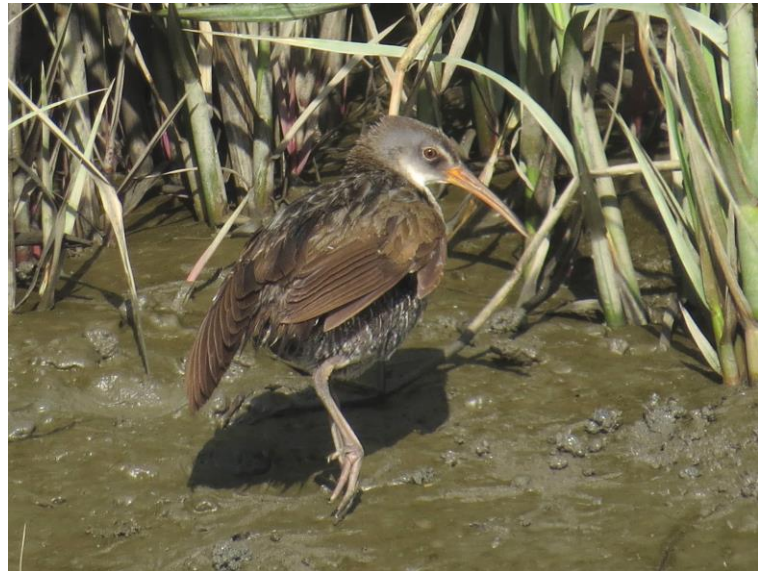
“Shy and secretive, rails are found in dense, marshy vegetation. Calls are usually the best clue to their presence, but patiently watching the edges of marshy ponds may yield views. They may be seen running rapidly across openings in the marsh, and they often swim short distances rather than fly. Rails' bodies are laterally compressed—hence the expression ‘thin as a rail’—which allows them to escape into dense grass or reeds.”

## **Eco-Haiku** by Liz Conroy

Tiny shining light  
Tucked among the fallen leaves  
Glow-worm says, “I'm here



**Photo of Clapper Rail by Catie Welch, Jekyll Island, Georgia—April 2015.**



**Photo of Clapper Rail by Richard Hall, Sapelo Island, Georgia—May 18, 2018**





**Photo of Black-browed Albatross juvenile seeking food by Kathy Parker, Falklands—January 2018**



**Photo of Black-browed Albatross chick defending itself by Kathy Parker, Falklands—January 2018**

## **Backyard Wildlife Sanctuary Program**

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](mailto:oconeeriversaudubonsociety@gmail.com)

## **The Black-browed Albatrosses of the Falkland Islands** by Kathy Parker

Where in the world will you see fees for excess baggage posted in the airport with listings for *penguins*? Or hear neighboring farmers passing the time of day by asking about their *albatrosses*? The Falkland Islands must be the only place!

The Falklands sit 300 miles east of South America, separated from Argentina by the broad Patagonia Shelf. The archipelago is about as far south of the Equator as the United Kingdom is north of it, with a similar maritime climate. The nearby ocean is very productive, making the islands ideal for nesting seabirds.

My husband, Al, and I had the opportunity to visit the Falklands three times in the last decade, often staying with sheep farmers. In addition to many marine mammals that frequent the surrounding waters, 63 different bird species breed in the Falklands, including 16 species found only there. The diverse avifauna includes albatrosses, penguins, cormorants, waterfowl, and waders, but I think my favorite is the Black-browed Albatross.

During their six-month breeding season, the majority of the world's Black-browed Albatrosses nest in the Falkland Islands. Adults come ashore in the fall, reunite with their mate, construct their nest in colonies, and incubate their egg once it is laid.

Colonies perch on slopes among tussock grass, high above the crashing surf. Parents share incubation duties, with one gone for up to 2 weeks, traveling hundreds of miles to feed, while the other remains on the nest.

In late December, the chick pecks its way out of the egg and looks like a bundle of grey fluff after it emerges and its feathers dry out. Chicks grow rapidly; the parents share feeding duties, regurgitating fish oil they produce from their diet of squid, fish, and lobster krill.

Initially one parent stays with the chick at all times. The parent's presence is important because skuas and gulls will swoop in and grab unattended chicks in seconds.

By late January, chicks are sufficiently large and feisty that they can ward off predators. Both parents then leave simultaneously on short foraging trips. By late April, chicks are ready to fledge. They take to the sea, not coming back to the colony to breed for 7-10 years. After that time, they will come back to breed.

But as "teenagers" they may return briefly to learn courtship skills before finally returning to breed as adults. Over the course of an albatross's potential lifetime of more than 50 years, it will repeat this sequence dozens of times and fly thousands of miles. A truly impressive bird!

## Is the North Atlantic Right Whale a Canary in the Mine?

summary of the May meeting by Liz Conroy

Thanks to Hans Neuhauser, retired Executive Director of the GA Land Conservation Center, for his talk on the North Atlantic Right Whale--the most endangered large whale in the world.

Whales are mammals, not fish. As a mammal, its closest relatives are the artiodactyls— animal with cloven hoofs— such as deer, pigs, cows, and sheep. The closest living relative to a whale is the hippopotamus.

Because it was considered “the right whale to kill” the name stuck and the whale became known as the Right Whale. Indeed, it had the features most attractive to hunters. Whale fat or blubber was boiled down into oil for lighting lamps and each Right Whale had lots of blubber. Baleen plates— bristles in the whale’s mouth which strain the plankton from the water—were used like plastic in products since it was stiff, yet flexible. The baleen is made from keratin like human fingernails and rattlesnake scales. In the Right Whale, the quantity from each animal was enormous.

The Right Whale is found along coastlines. Hunting them near to land was easier than going far out to sea. They are also slow swimmers making them easier to harpoon. Once the animal was killed, it floated to the surface and could be hauled with ropes (other baleen whales sink after dying).

Neuhauser outlined the history of the reduction of the whale’s numbers over the last thousand years. In 1100 A.D., the Basques hunted along the Spanish coast, killed the right whales and sailed over to the coasts of Newfoundland and Labrador to hunt there. By 1713, the Basques had exterminated the Right Whale population there. Today, what remains is only a relic population. These whales had once thrived from the coast of central Florida up through the North Atlantic, past Labrador, and over to Greenland, Iceland, Norway as well as the west coast of Africa. Today, this whale is found only along the eastern coast of North America from Florida to southern Canada.

Neuhauser discussed his own history of working to protect this whale. As a member of the Marine Mammal Stranding Network, he received a phone call from a friend to come collect a dead baby Right Whale found on Little St. Simons Island. Two weeks later he met a World Wildlife Foundation executive who expressed interest in Right Whales. The scientist knew the whales were seen off southern tip of the Bay of Fundy, and that the females disappeared each spring. Then the mother whales returned in the fall with their young. He was glad to learn where the whales went to calve.

GA DNR had taken films of a whale and the mother was recognized as one named “Fermata.” This sighting led to the confirmation of the location of the Right Whales’ calving grounds along the Georgia and north Florida coast in 1982.

Right Whales are inefficient feeders and need great concentrations of copepods. These tiny creatures are rich in fat the whale can easily digest. Each spring, they find these concentrations in Cape Cod Bay and the Great Southern Channel. By summer, they move to the mouth of the Bay of Fundy where ocean upwellings create concentrations of these copepods. As fall arrives, the pregnant females swim to the North Georgia coast while most of the males stay in the outer part of the Gulf of Maine.

Neuhauser became chair of National Recovery Team for the North Atlantic Right Whale in 1986. The Team sought ways to bring the whale back from the brink of extinction. They began with recommendations to avoid ship strikes such as moving shipping lanes a couple of miles away from feeding grounds and calving areas. The whales don’t perceive ships as dangerous. They ignore them and get fatally hit by them so there’s no learning. The group also wanted to find ways to prevent entanglement in fishing gear which kills whales. He noted that this year one whale swam all the way from Maine to Georgia while entangled in lobster fishing gear.

Canada has aggressive plans to help prevent ship strikes and entanglements. Although more preventive methods are being developed, Neuhauser pointed out, “We continue to see ship strikes and fishing gear entanglements as problems.” People need to learn how to “share the ocean,” he added. The numbers of Right Whales have slowly increased from about 300 in 1990 to about 500 today. Last year five new calves were seen, although this year no babies have been sighted in southeastern waters.

## Oconee Rivers Audubon Society

**President** Catie Welch  
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, artwork, 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