



The Yellowthroat

Voice of the

Oconee Rivers Audubon Society

March 2015

Vol. 26, No. 3

**Next Meeting:
Thursday, March 5, 7:00 p.m.
Sandy Creek Nature Center in Athens**

For the 7:00 p.m. presentation:

**Monarchs in a Changing World: status
and conservation of an iconic butterfly**

Dr. Sonia Altizer, whose UGA research focuses on animal migration, monarch butterfly ecology, and host-parasite interactions, will give a talk titled “Monarchs in a Changing World: Status and Conservation of an Iconic Butterfly.”

The distinctive orange-and-black butterflies and plump, striped caterpillar larvae are well-known visitors to Georgia gardens. They are famous for their spectacular migration across North America to wintering grounds in Mexico. Altizer will share exciting new discoveries about their amazing migration.

Since monarchs face growing threats from deforestation, pesticides, genetically modified crops and a changing climate, Altizer will also discuss active conservation of monarch efforts, including a recent petition to list monarchs under the federal Endangered Species Act.

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.

Spring Bird Walks – Think Spring!

Bird walks are from **8 a.m.-11a.m. or noon**. However, attendees may leave early. Please dress for the weather, wear practical shoes, hats and bring insect repellent and snacks/water as desired. (Also, check ORAS announcements and website for any last minute changes to this schedule).

If you have other questions please contact Ed Maioriello at: fieldtrip@oconeeriversaudubon.org

- Mar. 28: **State Botanical Garden (Day Chapel)**
- Apr. 04: **Sandy Creek Park**
- Apr. 11: **Lake Herrick/Oconee Forest Park**
- Apr. 12: **Sandy Creek Nature Center (SCNC)**
- Apr. 18: **Whitehall (S. Milledge & Whitehall Rd.)**
- Apr. 26: **State Botanical Garden (Day Chapel)**
- May 02: **SCNC-Cook’s Trail (clean-up)**

(Attendees for the Whitehall walk must be on time, and attendees for Cook’s Trail walk are asked to bring trash bags for picking up litter on the way out while still birding).

Spring Field Trips (out of town) *

- Apr. 25 6:00 a.m. Kennesaw Mountain
- May 09 7:00 a.m. Charlie Elliott Wildlife Center

* Please check listserv announcements for any changes in times and/or where to meet to carpool.

Bird It Big! *by Krista Gridley*

Ever thought of doing a Big Year? Sounds intimidating, but it doesn't have to be. In fact, it's a fun way to learn about birds and meet other birders. It's also contagious and pretty soon everyone will be helping you. Your phone will ring and the people around you will say, "What is the bird and where are you off to?"

Remember, it's your game. You choose the parameters based on your interests, budget, family, and time constraints. It helps to already have your family on board when you start, since you may be spending considerable time in the field. I chased all over Georgia one year, but your county, yard, or birding "patch" may be a more reasonable choice.

It's a long year from January 1st to December 31st. Even so, it never seems long enough to wrap up those last pesky nemesis birds! Part of the Big Year seasonal challenge is that birds migrate, change plumages, change their vocalizing, and vagrants drop in from who knows where. It's a year full of surprises!

Use eBird! It's free and lets you contribute data that is helpful to scientists. Somebody's going to have to keep up with all your lists, and it might as well be Cornell's Laboratory of Ornithology. You'll have all your vital statistics at your fingertips and you can use their database to figure out where to find all those birds you're looking for.

Sign up for eBird alerts so you'll know when to drop everything and chase! If you aren't familiar with eBird, ask a fellow Audubon eBirder to help you get started.

I came up with two chase mantras for the year, which I still subscribe to. The first is "Seeing the bird has to be worth NOT seeing the bird." I will drive hours for a cool bird, but there is always the risk that I won't find it. Still, every bird I have found and enjoyed makes the few misses more than worthwhile.

The second mantra is, "It can't be just about the birds." It's also about having fun, being spontaneous, spending time with the people you meet, helping others find their birds, discovering new stomping grounds, and being outside at hours of the day most folks are still in bed.

So, take the plunge! Dive into the new year in a BIG way. Open that eBird account and help out with some citizen science. Find some birding buddies. Laugh about the birds you see and groan about the ones that get away. Keep it all in perspective. Savor the birds. Most of all, HAVE FUN!

Sightings Reported at February Meeting

White-eyed Towhee, backyard in Five Points area, Clarke County, Richard Hall, all winter

Chipping Sparrow with white head at feeder, Gray Hwy, Monticello, Jasper County, Tom Patrick, last 6 weeks

2 Goldfinches, 1 House finch, 1 Eastern Towhee, Daniels Bridge Rd., Oconee County, Steve Duke, 2/05/15

Horned Grebes, Bear Creek Reservoir, Jackson County, Bob Cooper and UGA students (ornithology class) 1/30/15

7 Ruddy Ducks (males), Lake Chapman., Clarke County, Tim Homan and Page Luttrell, 2/02/15

Bald Eagle (adult), Five Points (near yard), Athens, Clarke County, Ed Maioriello, 1/25/15

Numerous Goldfinches (over 20), Winterville, Oglethorpe Country, Chris Martin, 2/04/15 – 2/05/15

Pileated Woodpecker (male), Lexington Hwy (near police station) Clarke County, Lynn Faust., 1/29/15

6 Redheads (males), Bear Creek Reservoir, Jackson County, Liz and Mike Conroy, 2/01/15

6 Pine Siskins, East Athens, Clarke County, Mack and Julie Duncan 2/04/15 -2/05/15

Rose-breasted Grosbeak (male), Booger Hill Rd., Madison County, David and Dorinda Dallmeyer, 1/30/15-2/7/15

Coastkeeper Describes Threats to Georgia's Largest River Basin

summary of February meeting by Liz Conroy

Thanks to Jen Hilburn, an ornithologist who's served as the Altamaha Riverkeeper's "Coastkeeper" since last spring. She discussed her work in one of the largest river basins on the Atlantic seaboard and gave a status update on American oystercatchers in the Altamaha delta.

Last March, Hilburn was named Coastkeeper for Altamaha Riverkeeper, a grassroots organization dedicated to protecting, defending and restoring Georgia's biggest river and its tributaries—which include the North and Middle Oconee Rivers in Athens.

To learn more about the inspiring and challenging work that she and others undertake to protect the Altamaha River Watershed: www.altamahariverkeeper.org Or, call 912-437-8164 If interested in signing up for 2015 Spring Events email: stewards@altamahariverkeeper.org

Share the Beach, Year Round

by Abby Sterling

During the spring and summer months a variety of shorebirds are dependent on our Georgia beaches for nesting and raising their young. It is during this time, especially, that we try to be respectful and share the beach with birds that need this restricted and special habitat. With species such as American Oystercatchers and Wilson's Plovers nesting on our beaches, it can be a great opportunity to see fascinating aspects of shorebird's life history. Anyone who's been able to witness fuzzy little Wilson's Plover chicks zipping around with their parents, or flocks of nesting Black Skimmers, or the courtship feeding rituals of Least Terns can certainly attest to this.

But beaches are also critical for more transient species—shorebirds that use our coast as key stopovers on their migrations to breeding areas much further north in the Arctic. These migrating shorebirds are just as important and fascinating as summer and year-round residents. After spending the last several summers researching two species of Georgia beach-nesting shorebirds for my graduate degree, I decided to take an opportunity to travel above the Arctic circle and volunteer on a shorebird project based in Barrow, Alaska to get first hand-experience with these long-distance champions. What I saw that summer helped me realize how important Georgia's beaches are on a global level.

Working with Arctic nesting shorebirds, like Pectoral Sandpipers and American Golden Plovers was incredible, but seeing some of the more familiar species like Dunlin and Semipalmated Sandpipers on the tundra was an eye-opening experience. When we see these birds here in Georgia, they are often in flocks, feeding frantically at the tide line or water's edge, or resting from their incredible journey. But in the Arctic it's a different story, and what I saw this past summer increased my admiration for these resilient birds.

When I got to Barrow, snow still blanketed most of the tundra, and insects were few, but still the shorebirds were arriving. After flying thousands of miles to get to the Arctic, there was little food, and nesting sites where still buried. Some of the Semipalmated Sandpipers carried geolocators—tiny light recording sensors that allow researchers to determine where a bird has travelled, and these indicated that some individuals were arriving from as far south as the west coast of South America. Imagine the journey that brings these tiny birds, weighing less than 25 grams, to land in such an inhospitable place!

However, with 24 hours of daylight, and slightly increasing temperatures, the snow soon melted and the birds began to pair up and stake out territories. I got to witness another incredible aspect of the lives of birds I'd seen so many times here in Georgia—many of the shorebirds that spend most of their time feeding and resting in Georgia act completely different on their Arctic breeding grounds. Male Dunlins hover above females and sing a whirring sort of alien space-ship song, Pectoral Sandpipers strut about booming and

waving a wing at the girls, and even the tiny Semipalmated Sandpipers have their own displays. They then go on to lay eggs in neat little bowl-like scrapes, tucked down into the dense tundra vegetation, and even on days with 30 mile-per-hour winds and temperatures barely above freezing, through precise nest placement and tireless incubation, many nests hatch successfully. Chicks grow quickly under the constant protection of their parents. By the end of the summer, it's not uncommon for adults to begin the migration south, leaving nearly independent chicks behind for a few final days on the tundra before they join their parents in southern regions. The whole breeding season lasts two short months. Then birds begin their journey south, landing along the coast at various stop-over places to rest and refuel.

It's during these migrations that we get to see them here in Georgia, one small part of a much larger journey. Knowing the incredible struggles that these birds face as they migrate and nest in the Arctic bolsters our need to protect beaches from disturbance and development for birds year round.

Many times, when we see large flocks of shorebirds feeding and resting, they are urgently refueling for the next leg of their journey. Understanding our responsibility to share beaches with these migrating birds can help enrich our beach-going experience. These feathered gypsies are connecting the entire hemisphere. Observing them and educating people about their journeys is the least we can do.



Photo of Red Phalarope chick by Abby Sterling, Barrow, Alaska, June 2014

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Photo of Rose-breasted Grosbeak (male) by David Dallmeyer, Booger Hill Rd., Madison County—
February 7, 2015

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