



The Yellowthroat

Voice of the

Oconee Rivers Audubon Society

March 2016

Vol. 27, No. 3

Next Meeting:

**Thursday, March 3, 7:00 p.m.
Sandy Creek Nature Center**

For the 7:00 p.m. presentation:

The Flap of a Butterfly's Wing: The Extraordinary and Essential Butterflies and Moths of Athens-Clarke County

Dr. James W. Porter, Meigs Professor of Ecology and Curator of Invertebrates at the Georgia Museum of Natural History, will describe rare butterflies and moths that inhabit Athens and will discuss why this is a special place for them to thrive.

Porter will display specimens from his collection of more than 1,000 butterflies and moths from Athens. In addition, he will share his knowledge about the conservation challenges facing these important pollinators in Athens and throughout Georgia.

This is a rare opportunity to see these amazing local butterflies and moths and to hear this award-winning speaker talk about natural areas and rare species within our county.

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.

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. 26: **State Botanical Garden (Day Chapel)**
- Apr. 02: **Sandy Creek Park**
- Apr. 09: **Lake Herrick/Oconee Forest Park**
- Apr. 10: **Sandy Creek Nature Center (SCNC)**
- Apr. 16: **Whitehall (S.Milledge & Whitehall Rd.)**
- Apr. 17: **ACC Landfill**
- Apr. 24: **State Botanical Garden (Day Chapel)**
- Apr. 30: **SCNC-Cook's Trail (clean-up)**

(Attendees for the Whitehall walk need to be right on time).

Spring Field Trips (out of town) *

Apr. 23: 6:00 a.m. Kennesaw Mountain
May 07: 7:00 a.m. Charlie Elliott Wildlife Center
May 14: 6:00 a.m. Ivy Log Gap Rd/Sosebee Cove

* Please check listserv announcements for any late changes.

The Seventh Diner (Part 2) by *Tim Homan*

About 20 minutes after he had first flown into the shelter, the male Black-and-white Warbler scouted around for a couple of more laps before landing right on the crown of Linda Russell's head. We were all amazed, especially Linda, who was standing hatless and freshly showered near the outside edge of the pavilion. We thought the small songbird might fly off as soon as he recognized his mistake. Or maybe start foraging on her scalp. But he did neither of those things. The wood warbler just stood there making himself right at home in the warm and hairy haven of Linda's wavy black tresses. Linda strained to stay still; she was clearly the more nervous of the two.

We circled Linda and clicked close-up photos like she was a famous movie star and we were pain-in-the-ass paparazzi. The 5-inch-long fluff of black and white feathers wasn't fazed by our near approach at eye level. The warbler remained perched in its original position on her noggin, nonchalantly turning its head from time to time. Finally, after what felt like five minutes but was probably only two, Linda's top-most ornament—more winged angel than stationary star—flapped back to its fan-blade perch. Later, she told us the bird's tiny feet had tickled her scalp. Our antics as we hovered around her taking digital photos, plus the tiny tickling feet, had made it very difficult for her to refrain from laughing.

After resting upon Linda's head, the river-camp warbler began a search pattern that lasted the remainder of the night. The bird alternated between two feeding strategies: pecking at the fan blades and the tops of the motor housings for dead insects and looking about for small flying insects or moths that had landed on the pavilion's light-colored ceiling. When the famished wood warbler locked in on an airborne mosquito, he made a short fluttering flight out from and back to his sally-perch fan blade. Brown made a slow-motion video of the songbird's flight and beak-snap snatch of a mosquito out of the air. You could actually see the mosquito a moment before it became flight fuel.

The Black-and-white followed his hunger from one fan blade to the next and from one fan to the next in repeated rhythm. Usually the mature male would flit to every blade—pecking for the dead, sallying out for the living—on a fan before moving to the next fan to repeat the process. Sometimes he would forage at all three fans in a row, then repeat the pattern in the opposite direction—back and forth, back and forth across the pavilion. Occasionally he would skip the center fan and fly to the far-end fan, the one he had been absent from the longest.

The warbler paid little or no attention to us and our movements. His mind and eyes remained laser-focused on finding food. When the songbird searched the surrounding air for flying insects, he did so with noticeable intensity, with short rapid-fire movements of his head. We walked up to a fan and focused our cameras a little over an arm's length away. He kept scarfing up mostly six-legged sustenance without a sideways glance. By way of experiment, several of

us waited beneath the fan at our end of the pavilion to see if the intrepid passerine would skip the fan blades we were standing under when he arrived. He didn't vary his routine. The bird's fearlessness gave us more evidence he had just finished or was still migrating. Early on, the wood warbler had reached an instinctive decision that his need for shelter and food were far greater than his fear of six bipedal apes sitting around a pavilion picnic table. The seventh diner's decision was a kind of clear-headed genius that played the best odds for survival. After all, our short tenancy in North America and our very low predation rates upon warbler-sized birds made it very likely that we well-fed humans were not included in their imprinted predator patterns. And, most likely, his most important and immediate concerns were an empty stomach and drained fat reserves.

The warbler's quest for food—more energy, more miles in the tank—had pared his personal space to some minimum distance. To our credit, we never tested that minimum, never gave him reason to quit his feast. We may have overdone the photography a bit, but he was such a beautiful and compelling wild creature, and he had landed on Linda's head. The Black-and-white Warbler had flown right into the wheelhouse of our nervous system's need for novelty, and we had responded by taking photos: the mildest form of acquisitive possession, the kindest form of counting coup—a major step in our cultural evolution.

We left the pavilion at nearly 9:00 and left the lights on to attract insect fodder for his feeding spree. I walked to the bathroom at around 2:30. The lights were still on and the seventh diner was still charging out from his fan-blade perches, eagerly gorging on mosquitos and small moths snapped out of the air with his long stiletto-thin bill. I took the same walk at 6:30; the warbler was still chowing down at the all-night buffet, all he could catch alive or discover dead. The passerine finally flew away in the crepuscular light of early morning, around 7:00, when Brown and I were setting up our stoves to start breakfast. All available evidence indicated that this tiny songbird, which may have weighed as little as 10 grams before entering the pavilion, had been binging on bugs for twelve and a half hours without a single audible brag or burp. More proof he had been a desperately hungry migrant.

The rest of the group left the river camp at 9:00 that morning. Page and I were scheduled to stay another night at Woods Ferry, so we turned on the pavilion lights at dusk and checked regularly for avian occupants. No mature male Black-and-white Warbler, no birds of any species.

Our paddlecraft crew and the seventh diner enjoyed a sort of short symbiotic relationship. For our part, we had turned on the lights, which added a small amount of warmth and drew in moths and other phototropic insects. The lights also provided him with daytime illumination for night-time hunting. We also thoughtfully exhaled carbon dioxide to lure mosquitos into the pavilion.

For his part, the Black-and-white Warbler nailed numerous mosquitos that otherwise might have taken involuntary blood donations from us. But that was just a small bonus.

He filled up his side of the benefit ledger with serendipity: the unsought rarity of his close and continued presence. He graced us with gifts much better than carbon dioxide and night-time light. He ignited excitement and joy, fired wonder and the repetition of “wow” to their highest pitch of the trip. He gave us closer and more prolonged looks at a wild, free, and beautifully patterned wood warbler than any of us thought possible.



Photo of Black and White Warbler sitting on Linda Russell's head, by Brown Widener, Woods Ferry River Camp, Georgia—Nov. 8, 2015

Backyard Wildlife Sanctuary Program Nest Box Promotion *by Ryan Chitwood*

Become a Certified Backyard Wildlife Sanctuary Homeowner by providing habitat for birds, wildlife, and native plants in our community! Submit an application by the end of the year and receive a bonus nuthatch nest box pending your yard's certification. For more information: www.oconeeriversaudubon.org Or please email: conservation@oconeeriversaudubon.org

236: Varied Thrush *by Katy Manley*

Monday, February 8th was my husband's birthday, and we both had the day off. After breakfast and a quick errand, we found ourselves on the Oconee Connector. Out of the blue, he said he'd like to go to Stone Mountain. DEAL!

By this time GABO-L had already lit up with news of the Varied Thrush so I cut across three lanes of traffic and headed west. No camera, no binoculars...I didn't even have a coat! I thought for a split-second about calling Ed and asking to borrow some binoculars, but I didn't want to blow my cover—my husband didn't know about the bird, and I didn't want him to change his mind!

Once we hit the Yellow River Game Ranch, I casually mentioned that there was “this new bird” I'd like to see if he didn't mind. He agreed (happy wife, happy life), and we paid our \$15, hung a left and pulled into the campground.

The location was easily identified by the numerous scopes and folks with binoculars pointed towards the trees. I got out of my car and saw it: my lifer Varied Thrush perched on a branch. It flew perfectly into view of a nearby scope where I got excellent views of its distinct face and robust orange. Number 236—the second (only to Limpkin) easiest lifer so far, all thanks to GABO-L and an understanding spouse. Was it worth \$15? Worth every penny!



Photo of Varied Thrush by Giff Beaton, Stone Mountain Park, Georgia—Feb. 8, 2016

The Melting of the Polar Ice Caps

summary of February meeting by Liz Conroy

Thanks to Gary Kochert for his talk on “The Frozen Ocean” on February 4. Kochert, a retired UGA professor, discussed the seasonal changes of sea ice and its importance to many forms of wildlife.

Kochert compared the differences between sea water ice and glacier ice and defined the different terms. For example, an ice cap is fresh water, whereas sea ice is salt water. Fast ice is sea ice that is attached to land. Ice floes are pieces of sea ice that are unattached to land. Pack ice occurs when floes jam together. Grease ice is smooth looking sea ice, Nilas ice appears to be in long strips and “pancakes” are when bits of ice bump into each other and round down their edges. An important term for birds and other wildlife is “polynya” which means open water in the ice.

Water is the only element at Earth’s surface that can be solid, gas, or liquid. Solid ice is less dense than liquid and floats to the top. This fact is crucial to life on earth. Ice actually insulates the water underneath, and wildlife can live below the surface ice and even within it!

Sodium and chloride are the two elements squeezed out of the hydrogen and oxygen atoms as the crystals form when salt water freezes, and the resulting ice is quite fresh. He showed a photo of the way brine channels form in the ice and salt water runs down these channels to leak out below the surface of ice creating stalactites of salt.

Also, Kochert discussed different expeditions to the North and South Poles in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and pointed out those countries bordering the Arctic Ocean. These countries include: Alaska, Canada, Greenland, Russia, Norway, and Finland.

As the sea ice extent in the Arctic decreases and the thickness declines due to warmer temperatures, the politics grow more intense. The bordering countries have increased interest in claiming more areas in the Arctic for shipping, fishing, and mineral exploration. Russia has shown aggressive behavior in this regard.

The decrease in the sea ice extent is speeding up due to the “Albedo Effect.” Whereas ice and snow reflect 85% of the solar radiation, open water absorbs 93%. The loss of sea ice—which is extremely biologically active—is detrimental to many organisms from the smallest of creatures to the largest of mammals.

Tiny diatoms live in ice channels and give a brownish tinge to the ice. Arthropods, such as krill, graze on the diatoms. Krill—basic to the entire food chain—are eaten by penguins, seals, fish, and baleen whales. At the top of the food chain, the polar bear depends on the seal for its survival.

The polar bear evolved from the brown bear about 200,000 years ago and is wedded to the sea ice. Kochert described

how only the female travels onto land to make her den in the snow for her cubs. Meanwhile, the male polar bear remains out on the sea ice to hunt for seals. When the sea ice melts, the bears cannot hunt seal and are trapped on land where many starve. They cannot live on bird eggs or on garbage in dumps. The walrus prefers ice floes for its habitat and is large enough to be safe from polar bears. Clearly, it is the polar bear that will not be able to survive without the sea ice.

Sightings Reported at February Meeting

Redhead, Bear Creek Reservoir, Liz Conroy, 1/31/16

Woodcock, Oconee National Forest (Scull Shoals area), Carla Franas, 1/30/16, 1/31/16

Woodcocks, Barnett Shoals Rd (from Bonita Hills to Bob Godfrey and down Old Barnett Shoals Rd), Kathy Parker, 12/22/15 – 2/4/16 (still heard and seen)

Sandhill Cranes (2), Old Farmington Rd, Watkinsville, Carole Ludwig, 2/4/16

Pine Siskins (2), SE Park (Lexington and Whit Davis Rd), Athens, Denise Zevos, 1/17/16

Redwing Blackbirds, Pettit’s Lane, Athens, Denise Zevos, 2/1/16

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