



The Yellowthroat

*Voice of the
Oconee Rivers Audubon Society*

May 2010

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Next Meeting Thursday, May 6, 7:00 p.m. Sandy Creek Nature Center

The Memorial Park Weed Warriors, an all-volunteer project, are tackling the severe exotic pest plant invasion at Memorial Park, Athens' only forested urban park. **Linda Chafin**, Conservation Botanist at the State Botanical Garden of Georgia, in cooperation with **Sue Wilde** and **Dorothy O'Niell**, leaders of the Memorial Park forest restoration project, will talk about the successes of the project, including recruiting 100s of volunteers from throughout NE Georgia, eradicating English Ivy, Chinese Privet, and Bush Honeysuckle from 3.5 acres, and planting more than 40 native plants that were bought with an ORAS grant.

Free Plant Swap! Bring your favorite native garden plants and exchange them with plants other people bring. Don't have anything to bring yourself? That's alright, come and see what we have! The plant swap will take place right before the start of the meeting.

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 will be a short way down the road on your right.

Sightings Reported at April Meeting

- **Barred Owl**, Green Acres/Crestwood, Paul & Albie Smith, 3/29
- **Barn Swallow**, no name or location given, 3/15
- **Northern Harrier** (male), just off Morton Road, Eugenia Thompson, 4/1. Female and male seen off and on all winter
- **Osprey**, Old Farmington Rd. (Oconee Co.), Carole Ludwig, 3/28
- **Brown-headed Nuthatch** (2), Highway 138 at Walnut Grove (Walton Co.), Carole Ludwig

Spring Bird Walks & Field Trips

The spring season is winding down and so do our walks and field trips. Whether you are an experienced birder or a beginner, come join us for the last 2 outings of the season. Email Jonathan Gray at fieldtrip@oconeeriversaudubon.org for information about specific bird walks and field trips.

- **May 1: State Botanical Garden**
8:00 a.m.-11:00 a.m.: meet at the upper parking lot near Day Chapel
- **May 8: Kennesaw Mountain**
7:00 a.m.-1:00 p.m.: meet at the Shops of South Athens parking lot by the Waffle House on South Milledge near the bypass

Annual June Potluck Picnic

The June 3rd Potluck Picnic will take place at Memorial Park, 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 our annual board elections and an evening of socializing in the outdoors!

Calling All Bird Lovers!

by Kate Mowbray

Many of you enjoy participating in events hosted by ORAS. Whether you are attending a meeting, searching for birds on a hike or reading this newsletter, volunteers made it possible. Our group depends on volunteers to help organize, plan and participate in a wide variety of activities. As a well-recognized organization, we receive many requests from the community to participate in their events or talk to their groups about what we do.

To continue being a positive organization for our community we need your help! Members often say they feel they don't know birds well enough to lead a hike or help with a booth. No need to worry! ORAS needs volunteers with a variety of strengths. All you need is an interest and a willingness to help. If you are interested in becoming more active, it is time to take the next step. Volunteer for an upcoming event, sign up to bring snacks, attend the annual retreat to help plan for next year or any other opportunity that is listed in the newsletter, on quicktopic, or through the listserv. Not only will you help our organization but you will also go home feeling proud as a peacock for a job well done.

Sign up for one of these upcoming activities:

- Zoo Day at Bear Hollow Wildlife Trail-Memorial Park. May 1st, 11am-3pm. Help visitors learn about backyard birds and the importance of keeping cats indoors. Contact Kate Mowbray at education@oconeeriversaudubon.org to sign up or for more information.
- Bird Banding at Panola State Park and Joe Kurz WMA. Several dates in April. Visit www.oconeeriversaudubon.org for more information.

ORAS Bird Conservation Grant

The Important Bird Area (IBA) Program is a worldwide effort to identify and conserve key breeding and feeding sites for birds. An Important Bird Area is a place that provides essential habitat for one or more species of bird, whether in breeding season, winter, or during migration. These sites are considered to be exceptionally important for bird conservation. Protection of the most critical of these sites is one important approach to the protection of many bird species.

There are 49 IBAs in Georgia with 1 official IBA (State Botanical Gardens and Whitehall Forest) in Athens/Clarke County. ORAS is working to nominate an additional IBA that includes Sandy Creek Nature Center, Sandy Creek Park, and the connecting Cook's Trail.

ORAS wishes to support a student, individual, or group conducting research or habitat improvement on any of the 5 IBA (or potential IBA) properties or other areas that provide important habitat to birds in Athens/Clarke County. Bird research and habitat conservation and restoration are important to protecting our birds. Reports and results will be used by ORAS and the staff of the IBAs to direct future projects and improve

the quality of bird habitat in Athens. The deadline for the application is June 1st, 2010.

For more information about this grant, please visit www.oconeeriversaudubon.org, or contact our president, Vanessa Lane, at president@oconeeriversaudubon.org.

Feral Cat Management, April Meeting

summary by Eugenia Thompson

Kerrie Anne Loyd, PhD candidate and Associate Wildlife Biologist in the Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources at the University of Georgia, spoke to our April 1 meeting on "Feral Cat Management: The science and social science behind the conflict."

Can you imagine 2000 feral cats per square kilometer? Such numbers have been reported in Rome, Italy; Israel; and Japan (at fish processing docks). It is estimated that there are 60-100 million feral cats in the United States.

Felis catus, native to Egypt, was brought to the New World to control pests. Unsterilized and abandoned, their numbers grew quickly as cats are very adaptable, are sexually mature at an early age, and reproduce quickly. Worldwide, they exist from sub-Arctic islands to the Australian Outback.

What scientists and others do not know is the *real* predation rate, how prey choice changes across the seasons, and how predation affects native wildlife numbers. Studies have shown that native rodents are more abundant in sites without cats, and exotic rodents are more abundant in sites where cats are abundant.

So much of the Trap-Neuter-Release/Return (TNR) information is anecdotal. Few studies have been published. Immigration and abandonment keep feral colonies going, even if the original cats are neutered. No one seems to have any idea what the percentage of immigration into colonies is. However published observation shows no reduction in numbers without substantial removal of cats for adoption. Computer models have shown stabilization of populations with no immigration. It seems that TNR colonies require constant effort indefinitely unless immigration, feeding, and abandonment are eliminated.

Policy on feral cat management involves all government levels. Citizen groups include animal welfare groups, animal rights groups, and conservationists or professional wildlife organizations. Ecological policy is complex, polarizing, and has delayed consequences. Scientists do not even know what majority public opinion is on feral cats. Unfortunately, even if more studies were conducted, the general public and policy makers are skeptical of science regarding feral cats.

Kerrie Anne also mentioned an upcoming study of free-roaming cats sponsored by the National Geographic and the University of Georgia. Check out www.kittycams.uga.edu for more information or to make a donation.

Feral Feline Fiasco

by Joel McNeal

On April 1st, an amendment to Clarke County's animal control ordinance took effect, legalizing the unproven method of feral cat control known as TNR (Trap-Neuter-Release) for those who register feral cat colonies. TNR practitioners capture cats, neuter them, vaccinate them for rabies, ear-clip them for identification purposes, re-abandon the cats to the capture location, and then feed the cats 365 days a year. The previously existing Clarke Co. ordinance prohibited owned cats from wandering from the owner's property and defined anyone who fed stray or feral cats as their owner, technically making TNR illegal in the county unless the cat colony was restricted to the TNR practitioner's property. Under the new amendment, TNR practitioners are exempted from ownership responsibilities for the animals they feed, while the cat colonies they feed are now protected under the law.

Although neutering a cat prevents that individual from future breeding, at least 75% of cats in Athens would have to be neutered overnight to cause a decrease in the cat population since the remaining breeding cats can easily reproduce fast enough to counter any population attrition through death and emigration. Furthermore, feeding cats 365 days a year in TNR colonies allows them to survive in dense colonies in places where food and resource limitation would otherwise require single cats to defend a large territory. Although they are well-fed, cats in these colonies do not lose their hunting instinct, and fledgling birds, native rodents, lizards, and frogs stand little chance of survival near such high cat densities. As such, professional wildlife biologists are unanimously opposed to legalization of TNR. Perpetuating cats in colonies and attracting other wildlife, such as raccoons and skunks, to food sources also increases risk of rabies through any unvaccinated colony as well as other diseases communicable to humans such as toxoplasmosis and raccoon roundworm. While TNR is presented as a humane alternative to euthanasia, the cats in these colonies do eventually die, whether in the jaws of coyotes, under the tire of a car, or through any number of diseases that result in prolonged suffering (including viruses such as FIV and FeLV, for which TNR neglect to vaccinate, citing cost). Because of this as well as the increased predation on wildlife incurred through practice of TNR, even the organization People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) disapproves of TNR.

Despite many pleas to the mayor and commission, a number of editorials and letters to the editor in the Athens Banner Herald and Flagpole, and a contingent of wildlife professionals, veterinarians, and other concerned citizens at both meetings of the commission dealing with this issue, TNR was legalized in Athens by a 9-1 vote (with only commissioner Doug Lowry voting no). Furthermore, \$10,000 of taxpayer money earmarked for animal control was gifted to TNR practitioners.

Unfortunately, this ill-conceived legislation was doomed to be passed from the beginning; Mayor Davison and the commission, knowing the amendment would be unpopular with conservation groups and citizens concerned about their property rights, fast-tracked it through without the standard public review period.

While it is unfortunate that the Athens-Clarke Co. government has valued a special-interest group of cat colony-feeders over wildlife, public health, and property rights concerns, it is important to keep in mind that feeding cat colonies is still illegal in Athens unless the colonies are registered and the cats are neutered. If you have feral cat problems in your yard, you should complain to as many county outlets as possible, particularly central services (706-613-3530). If you see any evidence of the feeding of cat colonies in town, please report them to vacuumeffect@gmail.com.

Happy Indoor Cats

by Eugenia Thompson

Since free-roaming 'owned' cats face and create most of the same problems as feral cats, it is important that all cat-owners keep their cats confined. Kittens that are kept inside grow up knowing nothing else and are usually happy inside. Adult cats that have been allowed to roam free can be acclimated to living indoors by an owner using a little love and patience. Either way, the cats have the same needs in order to be happy and satisfied.

- Provide a safe way for the cats to enjoy the outdoors. A screened porch or a deck without access to the ground allows cats to bask in the sun and smell the outside smells. Some owners even create totally screened-in cat runs.
- Provide lots of toys and things to explore inside. Boxes, paper bags, balled-up paper or foil, and other safe, similar objects stimulate cats. Corrugated cardboard scratchers give your cats an acceptable place to scratch their claws.
- Spend time with your cats.
- Plant kitty grass in low, flat pots for your cats to graze on indoors.
- Clean litter boxes often.
- Cats can be trained to go outside on a harness and leash, but this is best begun when they are young.

Your cats will be safer inside, and with a little human attention, they can be quite happy. For more information, check out www.abcbirds.org/cats.

A treat for the eyes

posted on QT (QuickTopic) by Richard Hall on April 7

There were 8(!) **BLUE-WINGED TEAL** at Lake Herrick this morning.

Joel McNeal came to see them, his 174th species for Clarke County. According to eBird, this is the highest number of species seen by a single observer in Clarke County (82% of the species ever recorded), just rewards for his many excellent finds over the last few years. If anyone thinks they can give him a run for his money, we encourage you to submit all your Clarke Co. records into eBird! <http://ebird.org>.

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