



The Yellowthroat

*Voice of the
Oconee Rivers Audubon Society*

May 2012

Vol. 23 No. 5

Next Meeting:
Thursday, May 3, 7:00 p.m.
Sandy Creek Nature Center

For the 7:00 p.m. presentation:

Tallassee Tract: An Important Resource

Karen G. Porter, Ph.D., Professor Emerita, Odum School of Ecology will speak about the Tallassee Tract. The 570-acre tract is near Tallassee Shoals on the Middle Oconee River in the northwest corner of Clarke County. It is one of the rare remaining large pieces of land in the county with old forest, clean spring-fed streams and a bottomland with canebrakes.

Compared with the rest of the county and the region, the tract has had minimal disturbance. The high relief and steep ravines made it difficult for farming. A 1938 USDA aerial photograph shows a hardwood forest cover of over 75% that persists today. Unique habitats include steep north-facing slopes and an upland holly forest. There is also evidence of Creek, Mississippian and Paleo-Indian occupation.

Year-round studies are needed to fully characterize the biotic diversity and archeology. Bird, plant, stream and butterfly studies have begun. Size and proximity make it an especially important natural resource for the county and the region.

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.

White-Nose Syndrome in Bats

summary of April meeting by Liz Conroy

Thanks to Dr. Kevin Keel for presenting the April program, **White-Nose Syndrome in Bats**. He discussed how the world is changing rapidly and that some of the fastest changes include the emergence of serious disease issues.

Keel described the White-Nose Syndrome (WNS) as a particularly serious disease threat to wild bats in the U.S. The hardest hit species (those suffering the greatest mortality from this fungus) include our Tri-colored Bats and Little-brown Bats. These bats face extirpation in the Northeast.

Geomyces destructans—the newly described fungus with unique spores that causes WNS—requires cold, damp caves to thrive and infect bats as they hibernate. So non-cave dwelling bats seem to be safe. Also, *Geomyces* is not seen in Virginia Big-eared Bats and Ozarks Big-eared Bats. Perhaps their skin includes some antimicrobial peptides. But researchers face challenges studying the big-eared bats due to the difficulty in keeping them alive in captivity.

WNS was first recognized in a commercial cave in NY. This suggests anthropogenic introduction, particularly as it shares 100% identity with the fungus affecting European bats. Time is short, he said; so researchers must choose topics carefully.

Spring Bird Walks (in town) * *by Ed Maiorello*

Bird walks - 8 a.m.-11a.m. or noon. Attendees may leave early. Dress for the weather: sturdy shoes, hat, sunscreen.

May 05 SCNC/Cook's Trail Cleanup (Bring a trash bag for picking up litter on the way out while still birding).

Spring Field Trips (out of town) *

Apr. 28 6:00 a.m. Kennesaw Mountain

May 12 7:00 a.m. Charlie Elliott

May 19 6:00 a.m. Ivy Log Gap Road/Sosebee Cove

* Check listserv announcements for where to meet

March 2012 Clarke County eBird Sightings Summary *by Richard Hall*

121 species were reported to eBird for March 2012, compared with 114 species in 2011 and 91 in 2010.

This extremely high total is in part explained by the unseasonably warm weather prompting record early arrivals of many migrants, including a staggering 13 warbler species by the month's end.

The new early dates, in chronological order, are: Barn Swallow, Lake Chapman, on 3rd (MB, RH, VL); Blue-winged Teal, Oxbow Lake, on 6th (RH); Louisiana Waterthrush, State Botanical Garden, on 7th (JM, RH, BKOG); Yellow-throated Warbler, State Botanical Garden, on 10th (RC, SH); Chimney Swift, Milledge Avenue, on 12th (MB); Spotted Sandpiper, Lake Chapman, on 23rd (MB, RH, MJ); Hooded Warbler, State Botanical Garden, on 23rd (CJ); Broad-winged Hawk, State Botanical Garden, on 24th (ORAS walk); Black-throated Green Warbler, Cook's Trail, on 24th (JN); Chuck-will's-widow, Milledge Heights, on 29th (EM); Prothonotary Warbler, Cook's Trail, on 30th (RH); Great Egret, Lake Chapman, on 30th (RH); and Prairie Warbler, S Milledge fields, on 30th (RH).

Avian highlight of the month was the discovery of Clarke Co.'s first Painted Bunting, a bright green female at the Athens Landfill on 16th (MB, RH). Given the early date, it is possible that this bird was a local winterer rather than a migrant. Another great find by MB was Athens' first recent record of Anhinga perched in a treetop at Lake Herrick on 22nd.

It was a good month for waterbird passage at Lake Chapman, with new county high counts set for Bufflehead (12) and Horned Grebe (10) on 9th (MB, RH, JN). 14 Gadwall, 1 American Wigeon, 46 Ring-necked Duck, 25 Lesser Scaup and 3 Red-breasted Mergansers were present there on 3rd (MB, RH, VL), 13 Redhead and 2 Bonaparte's Gulls were seen on 16th (MB, RH), the county's 4th Greater Scaup was recorded on 23rd (MB, RH, MJ) and a Northern Shoveler was present on 31st (RH, JN, ORAS walk). Notable shorebirds included a Least Sandpiper at Lake Herrick on 22nd (MB, RH), while Wilson's Snipes were recorded from the Athens landfill on 6th and Charlie Bolton Road on (MB, RH, JN). Always scarce in the Athens area, a Vesper Sparrow was seen at the South Milledge fields on 30th (RH). Good yard sightings included an Osprey (spotted by MB) over RH's house on 22nd, and a maximum of 11 Pine Siskins in BKOG's backyard on 23rd.

Observers: Mirko Basen, Rachel Cass, Richard Hall, Steve Holzman, Mitchell Jarrett, Clark Jones, Vanessa Lane, Ed Maioriello, Joel McNeal, James Neves, Bill and Karla O'Grady, John Whigham.

The Art of Birding *by Pat McAlexander*

Oconee Rivers Audubon Society's Ed Maioriello presented two classes to OLLI (Osher Lifelong Learning Institute) @UGA members in March. The first class, "The Art of Birding," helped new birders learn ways to identify birds.



Photo of Ed Maioriello and new birders by Pat McAlexander

In the second class, "Birding - Learning Bird Songs," Ed played audios of bird songs, described their mnemonics and phonetics and (often humorously) suggested their "meaning." For example, "I am a virile, sexy robin." Also, Ed led the class on a field walk. In the nearby woods, many bird chips and songs were heard, and Ed identified them.

I signed up for Ed's bird song class, wanting to expand my general knowledge. In particular, I wanted to identify a mystery song I heard repeatedly in my yard, sung by a bird or birds I hadn't been able to spot. At home, I reviewed Ed's handout giving phonetics for bird songs, and decided the mystery song sounded most like "poor Sam Pea-body, Pea-body, Pea-body"—a white-throated sparrow! I recorded the song, phoned Ed, played it for him, and told him my guess. "Ding-ding-ding!" he said. "You win the prize!" I still may not be able to identify every bird singing in my yard, but after Ed's class I feel able to identify many more of them!

Amphibian Discoveries *by Todd Pierson*

While ornithologists and herpetologists butt heads over whose taxa are more interesting (ours are!), we can find common ground in the beauty of song. Whether chirped from the beak of a Common Yellowthroat or belled from vocal sacs of a Gopher Frog, under the melodious airwaves we can unite.

But what if the frogs stopped calling? What if spring became silent?

Georgia is home to an impressive diversity of amphibians—thirty-one species of frogs and approximately fifty-five species of salamanders. Yet, in a 21st century characterized by rapid development and fragmentation of habitat, climate change, and the emergence of infectious diseases, the future is uncertain for some species. The good news is that for every threat, there is a great success story.

For example, the Gopher Frog (*Rana capito*) is one of Georgia's largest and most charismatic frogs. For most of the year, it remains underground in Gopher Tortoise burrows, stump holes, and other refugia in the sandhills. Heavy winter and spring rains bring these fascinating frogs out to breed in ephemeral ponds. The rampant destruction and development of sandhills and longleaf forest in Georgia and the rest of the Southeast has painted a bleak future for the Gopher Frog. It is currently known from just six sites in Georgia, but it won't go down without a fight. Researchers at the University of Georgia, the Jones Ecological Research Center, and the Atlanta Botanical Gardens have teamed up to reintroduce Gopher Frogs to their (now protected and restored) former habitats. A step in the right direction!

Climate change appears to be a major future threat to amphibians. A study done by the Maerz Lab at UGA found that significant declines in the range of salamanders in the Southern Appalachians could occur as soon as 2020. The risk is particularly frightening because it even affects populations that reside on protected lands where habitat destruction is not an issue. Fortunately, efforts are being made to mitigate these changes. Better models of the effects of climate change on vertebrates are constantly being developed. Also, some captive propagation of selected species has been attempted. Still, climate change remains the great unknown in amphibian conservation.

Perhaps the most worrisome threat to amphibian conservation is emergent infectious diseases. Many of the amphibian extinctions in the last two decades—particularly those in Central and South America—can be tied to a fungus called “chytrid” that has been spreading through amphibian populations. While the origin of the fungus remains a mystery, it has caused the extinction of dozens of species and radically changed the amphibian community of the neotropics. This fungus has been found in amphibians in the eastern United States (including Georgia), but doesn't seem to be negatively affecting our populations—a major enigma

in the study of the disease. Other diseases (e.g. Ranavirus), however, have caused rapid and worrisome die-offs in amphibian populations in Georgia. Fortunately, research exploring the biology and control of these emergent infectious diseases is growing quickly.

Georgia's diverse amphibian heritage is threatened from all directions, and some species (e.g. the Flatwoods Salamanders) seem to be on an inevitable spiral towards extinction. However, the story is not all doom and gloom. In fact, we're still frequently discovering new species in the Peach State! Often, a widespread generalist species is found, upon closer examination, to be composed of several morphologically similar species (or “cryptic species” as we call them). Recognizing and describing these groups is critical for planning the conservation of amphibians as a whole.

In addition, a truly radical discovery was made in northeastern Georgia in 2007. A small group of amphibian biologists discovered a new genus of salamanders (later named *Urspelerpes*, the Patch-Nosed Salamander) in the Appalachian foothills near Toccoa. It has been 50 years since such an important amphibian discovery has been made in the U.S. The story made international press. Now, we are planning to make sure that this species is here to stay for many more years!



Photo of a Gopher Frog by Todd Pierson



Photo of a Patch-Nosed Salamander by Todd Pierson

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Audubon Tips on Helping Birds

by National Audubon

Find details on how to help birds as they wing their way North: <http://athome.audubon.org/ten-ways-make-difference-migrating-birds> Ideas include: eliminate pesticide/herbicide around your home. Plant native shrubs, trees. Keep cats inside. Make windows visible to birds with screens, by closing drapes or stick multiple decals on the glass (decals must be two to four inches apart). Leave snags and brush piles in your yard. Always provide clean water!

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