



The Yellowthroat

Voice of the

Oconee Rivers Audubon Society

May 2013

Vol. 24, No. 5

Next Meeting:

Thursday, May 2, 7:00 p.m.
UGA's Odum School of Ecology

In May, Oconee Rivers Audubon Society (ORAS) will meet on our usual first Thursday of the month. Our May meeting location, however, will be the Odum School of Ecology.*

For the 7:00 p.m. film presentation:

Hummingbirds: Magic in the Air

Hummingbirds represent one of nature's most interesting paradoxes—they are the tiniest of birds, yet they qualify as some of the toughest and most energetic creatures on the planet. New knowledge—gained from scientists who are currently making great breakthroughs in hummingbird biology—make this a perfect time to focus on these shimmering, flashing feathered jewels of the natural world.

Utilizing latest high-speed and infra-red camera technology, **Nature** takes viewers inside the extraordinary universe of these brilliant birds in **Hummingbirds: Magic in the Air**.

(**Nature** is a production of THIRTEEN in association with WNET.ORG—one of America's most prolific and respected public media providers).

"Hummingbirds live life in the fast lane," said Fred Kaufman, Series Executive Producer. "They're not only visually striking but highly creative in their survival strategies." (This film is approximately 54 minutes).

*Directions to the University of Georgia's School of Ecology from Loop 10 By-pass:

- Exit 7 on College Station Road and turn west toward campus.
- Turn right onto East Campus Road
- Continue north on East Campus Road
- Turn left at second red light onto W. Green Street
- Turn right into S-07 parking lot (open after 6 p.m.)
- The Ecology building is on the north side of the parking lot behind trees (a sidewalk is nearby).

Spring Bird Walks (in town)

Bird walks are from **8 a.m.-11a.m. or noon**. However, attendees may leave early. Dress for the weather: sturdy shoes, hat, bug spray, sunscreen. Bring water and snacks if desired. Also, please check ORAS announcements for any changes to this schedule. Directions to each walk location are available at: www.oconeeriversaudubon.org

- Apr 13: Whitehall Forest (be on time)
- Apr 20: Botanical Garden
- Apr 28: **ACC Landfill (5700 Lexington Rd)**
- May 04: **SCNC Cook's Trail Clean-up** *Bring a trash bag to help collect any litter along the trail.

Spring Field Trips (out of town)*

Apr. 27 6:00 a.m. **Kennesaw Mountain**

May 11 7:00 a.m. **Charlie Elliott Wildlife Center**

* Check ORAS announcements for info on where to meet.

Georgia Important Bird Area (IBA)

summary of April meeting by Carole Ludwig

Thanks to Charlie Muise for the April program, **Mission of the Georgia Important Bird Area (IBA) Program**. He discussed his involvement in the IBA program. As director his duties are many, varied and far-ranging throughout Georgia. The mission is to monitor, enhance and conserve those sites which are essential habitats for bird populations.

Currently, our state hosts 49 IBAs, with a bias toward the coast. Also, some of these sites are "global", which means they harbor threatened species. Muise collaborates with a variety of groups, including many volunteers. Activities for these groups typically involve research, learning projects and bird-banding. The latter serves to more accurately estimate population variation—a crucial activity for helping scientists and others monitor bird populations. Charlie encourages the use of two search engines that will donate to the IBA each time they are used: GoodSearch.com and GoodShop.com.

March 2013 Clarke County eBird Sightings Summary *by Richard Hall*

116 species were reported to eBird in March 2013, compared with 119 in 2012 and 114 in 2011. The highlight of the period was the discovery of an American Golden-Plover at the soon-to-be developed field at the end of College Station Road on 18th; not only was this the first county record of this species, but also the 250th species reported to eBird from Clarke County (JN). The third county eBird record of anhinga came from the Athens landfill on 26th-28th (RH), and unlike the previous two records, it stayed around to be admired by many.

The unusually cold weather delayed the arrival of many of our neotropical migrants, although new early arrival dates were recorded for Ruby-throated Hummingbird on 21st (BKOG's backyard) and Solitary Sandpiper at Sandy Creek Park on 24th (RH). It also resulted in aggregations of hungry swallows at water bodies, with new county high counts recorded of 30 Northern Rough-winged Swallows at Lake Herrick on 23rd (MJ) and 120 Tree Swallows at Lake Chapman on 26th (RH). Late-lingering winterers included large numbers of Rusty Blackbirds (100 at Sandy Creek Park on 23rd) and Pine Siskins (120 in RH's backyard), along with new county late dates for Rufous Hummingbird (30th March in BKOG's backyard) and a Fox Sparrow consorting with a White-crowned Sparrow in RH's backyard until month end.

The month was also notable for rainstorms that downed several unusual waterfowl at Lake Chapman, including new county high counts of 19 Green-winged Teal on 9th (CJ) and 8 Greater Scaup on 23rd (RH), and 10 duck species, 12 Bonaparte's Gulls and 2 Horned Grebes on 31st (MB, RH, MJ). Lake Herrick also had an excellent run of waterfowl through the month, including the first site record of Redhead on 6th, a maximum count of 8 Bufflehead on 23rd, and the second site record of Red-breasted Merganser on 31st (RH).

Observers: Mirko Basen, Richard Hall, Mitchell Jarrett, Clark Jones, James Neves, Bill and Karla O'Grady.



Photo of Anhinga by Richard Hall

Wetland Salamander Activity in Spring

by Todd Pierson

Unlike that of frogs, salamander reproductive activity does not peak in early spring. For the most part, these tailed amphibians breed either before or after the burst of activity that is exhibited this time of year by their more melodious cousins. Nonetheless, April and May do represent months of great salamander activity worth observing.

Perhaps the most conspicuous of these winter-breeding salamanders are the mole salamanders of the family Ambystomatidae. Three species are common in the Athens area: the Spotted Salamander (*Ambystoma maculatum*), the Marbled Salamander (*Ambystoma opacum*), and the Mole Salamander (*Ambystoma talpoideum*)*. Spotted salamanders begin breeding with the first heavy rains of January, and reproduction reaches a crescendo in February. By April, the adults are long gone. After performing their reproductive duties and creating the next generation, these secretive salamanders head for the hills, where they live in underground burrows for the duration of the year. Between March and April, the jelly-like egg masses of these species hatch, each releasing hundreds of squirming larvae into the ephemeral ponds in which they breed. Now, the clock begins. These ponds rarely hold water year-round and typically have a relatively short hydroperiod. For if you breed in a pond that dries up in the summer, you can largely eliminate the risk of fish predation upon your larvae.

However, this strategy is a double-edged sword! Unlike the relatively long-lived larvae of amphibians that can coexist with fish (e.g. the bullfrog), these salamanders must rapidly develop and metamorphose into their terrestrial forms before the pond dries. During April and May, the Bushy-gilled Spotted Salamander larvae are prowling the shallows of their ephemeral ponds, ruthlessly slurping up invertebrates and attempting to beat the ticking clock.

Another species of salamander has taken this race to the next level. Four-toed Salamanders (*Hemidactylum scutatum*) are a peculiar and enigmatic member of the lungless salamander family (Plethodontidae) and typically inhabit especially shallow ephemeral wetlands with an abundance of *Sphagnum* moss. Between January and March, females nest (often communally) under loose moss clumps just above the waterline and guard their eggs for a month or two until they hatch. Then, the petite larvae squirm into the water and begin what is one of the shortest larval periods of any caudate. Within three to six weeks, Four-toed Salamanders have completed their larval phase and metamorphosed onto land. This short window makes it quite difficult to observe larval *Hemidactylum* in the wild.

While these ephemeral pond-breeding salamanders have found a way to avoid predation by fish, they often cannot escape the gape of their own kind. The Marbled Salamander (*Ambystoma opacum*) has evolved a way to cheat the system of the ticking clock. Instead of waiting for January's rains to fill its breeding ponds, females of this species lay their eggs

in the dry pond basins during the fall. They sit with their eggs—fending off would-be predators—until the long awaited rains submerge their eggs. Then, the female flees to uplands, and the larvae hatch. Initially, they're fragile and vulnerable, but the toughest of the bunch bulk up on aquatic invertebrates and increase in size several times over. Then, by the time that Spotted Salamanders, Four-toed Salamanders, and other winter breeders have laid their eggs, these marbled salamander larvae are formidable predators.

They can be hyperabundant in ephemeral ponds and are known to eat both intact eggs and larvae of many sympatric salamander and frog species. Boosted by these easy pickings, Marbled Salamanders grow throughout the spring and also must metamorphose before the pond dries in the summer.

So while you are listening to the melodious choruses of treefrogs and toads, keep an eye out for their silent cousins who share the water. It's a salamander-eat-salamander world out there, and the clock is ticking.

* A point of clarification: the term "mole salamander" is used both to refer generally to all salamanders of the family Ambystomatidae and also for the species *Ambystoma talpoideum*.



Photo of *Ambystoma opacum* by Todd Pierson



Photo of *Ambystoma maculatum* by Todd Pierson

Booby Prize *by Chuck Murphy*

As a serious amateur photographer, I was delighted with the chance to travel to the Galapagos Islands last year. The opportunity to photograph tons of wildlife on and around those islands was exciting. This was especially true because so much of the wildlife was quite tame, allowing photographers to get up close and personal to their subject matter without having to haul around huge lenses on small boats.

I was particularly interested in seeing the three species of boobies that live in the Galapagos: the Masked, Red-footed and Blue-footed. Nobody knows for sure where the name comes from, although it may be related to "bobo," which is the Spanish word for clown. They all seem to lack any sense of wariness. Such relaxed behavior meant sailors were able to walk right up and easily grab them and kill them.

As a photographer, I figured that with their colorful feet, spectacular hunting habits and enchanting mating dances, they would make great subject matter. My guess was correct.

Although all three species catch fish by power-diving into the ocean whenever they spot prey, they have evolved a "non-compete agreement" which allows the three species to fish in peace. The Blue-footed Boobies hunt close to shore. Masked Boobies feed farther off shore beyond the Blue-footed fishing grounds, and the Red-footed Boobies search for prey well out to sea from their nesting grounds on the more remote islands of the archipelago.

Our tour boat never made it out to the remote islands where the huge (more than 250,000) colonies of Red-footed Boobies live. But I caught a glimpse of a few shy Red-footed Boobies hanging out on the islands we did visit.

Fortunately, the Masked and Blue-footed Boobies were readily seen, both on their nests and plunge-diving for fish less than a hundred yards offshore.

It was actually unsettling how tame these birds were. As our group of a dozen tourists walked through their nesting grounds, we had to carefully step around where the birds were sitting on their nests. They were simply oblivious to our presence, as if we were invisible.

I would have liked more time to watch their behavior and take more photos, but with the birds being as cooperative as they were, there were sufficient photo ops to bring back some decent shots. Also, I was able to get a nice image of a Blue-footed Booby perched on a rock, staring right back down the barrel of my lens. That image has already been accepted into one juried photo exhibition: My Booby Prize.

View the Booby Prize photo and other Galapagos photos in the album at: <http://boywithcamera.com/boobies> Also, please check out more of Chuck's wildlife imagery at: www.BoyWithCamera.com

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Photo of Blue-footed Booby by Chuck Murphy

Speaking of Prizes. . .

Gary Crider—longtime ORAS Member—is a recipient of this year's Alec Little Environmental Award. Congratulations to Gary! (Watch for more details about this special award in the June/July issue of *The Yellowthroat*).

Oconee Rivers Audubon Society

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