



# The Yellowthroat

Voice of the

Oconee Rivers Audubon Society

May 2016

Vol. 27, No. 5

## Next Meeting:

**Thursday, May 5, 7:00 p.m.**  
**Sandy Creek Nature Center**

For the 7:00 p.m. presentation:

### How Cats Affect Wildlife: Kitty Cam 2.0

Sonia Hernandez, an associate professor with the UGA College of Veterinary Medicine, will speak on "Using a Novel Technique to Understand How Cats Affect Wildlife." Her project includes using lightweight cameras to record the activities of feral cats in trap-neuter-release colonies on Jekyll Island. Her initial project used waterproof cameras to record the activities of outdoor domestic cats in Athens in 2010 and 2011. The study found that only 44 percent resorted to hunting, mostly to take lizards and voles. The research is supported by the National Geographic Society, which developed the camera system, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the American Bird Conservancy.

Hernandez has a veterinary degree from Louisiana State University and a Ph.D. from UGA. In addition to cat behavior, her research interests include exploring how human modifications to the environment affect wildlife disease transmission.

**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.

## Sightings Reported at April Meeting

**Black-bellied Whistling Ducks (2), Greater Scaup,** Lake Herrick, Athens, Richard Hall, 4/7/16

**Hooded Warbler (male),** Five Points (backyard), Richard Hall, 4/7/16

**Red-shouldered Hawks (mated pair),** Bogart, Alison Huff, 4/6/16

**Ruby-throated Hummingbird,** Tallassee Rd (backyard), Karen Porter, 4/2/16

**Ruby-throated Hummingbird (male),** Winterville, Athens, Katy Manley, 4/3/16

**Chimney Swifts (2),** SCNC, Athens, Katy Manley, 4/1/16

**Wild Turkey,** Bear Creek Reservoir, Liz Conroy, 3/20/16

**Bald Eagle,** near Morgan Manor, Watkinsville, Lorene Winter, 1/10/16

**Killdeer,** Barrow Elementary School, Athens, Steve Duke, 3/31/16

**Eastern Bluebird,** Oconee County, Athens, Steve Duke, 4/6/16

**Horned Grebe,** Lake Herrick, Vince Howard, 4/7/16

## Spring Field Trips (out of town) \*

May 07 7:00 a.m. Charlie Elliott Wildlife Center

May 14 7:00 a.m. Ivy Log Gap Rd/Sosebee Cove

\* Please check listserv announcements for any late changes.

## ORAS Bird Nest Box Projects – Join Us for These Volunteer Opportunities

by Brian Cooke

Cavity nesting birds have suffered greatly from the loss of required habitat components, mainly cavity-ready snags. Bird nest box projects have been a popular way to fill this habitat need for birds. We often hear about great nest box building projects, but we don't hear about the less glamorous work of long-term nest box maintenance.

Significant amounts of money are spent building these nest boxes, and Oconee Rivers Audubon Society (ORAS) is aiming to improve community upkeep of these resources. This will give us ample opportunities to fulfill our mission of wildlife habitat improvement and education.

This year, a total of 35 volunteers struck out on the trails of Sandy Creek Park, Sandy Creek Nature Center, Watkinsville Woods, Bishop Park, and Memorial Park to inspect, inventory, collect data, and in some cases, repair nest boxes.

Expert volunteers Leila Dasher and Katy Manley were able to inventory and inspect approximately 25 nest boxes. Not only did they complete the inventory, they brought a local community group (Trail Life) along to teach them about bird nesting habits and how we can help. Through this education opportunity, ORAS was able to reach approximately 20 youth community members and five adults. The intergenerational message of nest box maintenance for bird habitat improvement was one that resonated with many because nest boxes are a common backyard feature.

In addition to Sandy Creek Nature Center, we had Carla Francis of Oconee River Land Trust and Jake Knox of Athens-Clarke County Leisure Services inventorying nest boxes at Sandy Creek Park. Sue Wilde and Brown Widener cleaned six boxes at Memorial Park. Gary Crider and Alice Woodruff worked on the many boxes at Watkinsville Woods.

All nest boxes were mapped by Heather Abernathy, a graduate student at UGA, giving us a great resource for future work on the nest boxes.

This was a huge effort by many volunteers, and it allowed us to reach new community members. Not only did we make an impact, we were able to spend time outside. Over the coming months, additional efforts will be made to fix or move nest boxes based on the data gathered on this day.

If you enjoy low-key, independent volunteer opportunities, we could always use your help. Interested? Email Brian at [president@oconeeriversaudubon.org](mailto:president@oconeeriversaudubon.org).



**Photo of ORAS volunteer (participating in nest monitoring) by Brian Cooke, Sandy Creek Park, Athens—Jan. 30, 2016**

### **Birth of a Birder** by Karla O'Grady

Many years ago, long before I had any interest in birds, I took a field trip to observe dog-tooth violets in early spring. I wandered up a steep trail to a huge limestone outcropping that rose the equivalent of three stories above Avey's Run. It was a cool day so I sat on the rocks to soak up the sun when I heard a screaming sound and looked up to see a large bird screaming and circling. Soon he was joined by a second large bird who circled with the first and joined in the screaming. Suddenly they joined talons and began spinning together, and as they spun they dropped below my perch! As I looked down on them they fell toward Avey's Run.

I watched in horror as they spun below me, convinced they were going to crash into the stream and die. Suddenly they broke apart and rose up, much to my great relief. I rushed back to the Nature Center to find a naturalist and when I described what I had witnessed, he looked at me and said, "You are so lucky. As long as I have been birding I have never witnessed this." He went on to explain that I had witnessed the mating ritual of the local Red-tailed Hawk and thus a birder was born.

## **Friendly Fire: SCNC Forest Restoration Project** *summary of April meeting by Carole Ludwig*

Thanks to Michael Wharton for his update on the Managed Forest Project in 30 acres of Sandy Creek Nature Center.

Wharton is the Administrator for Operations in the Athens-Clarke County Leisure Services Department and managed the project. The goals were to re-establish good flora and fauna habitat, to enhance learning opportunities for the public, provide career and training opportunities, reduce potential wildlife damage and to become certified as a sustainable forest.

At the beginning of the project, the area was examined and mapped according as to its historical use. Then existing site conditions were determined. Two of the major goals were to re-establish an oak forest and to alter the existing pine forest to be diverse and sustainable.

In November 2015 professional land and forestry experts were brought in for their expertise on controlling invasives and diseases, thinning of plots, harvesting, replanting and controlled burns.

Following their advice mechanical removal and herbicide application followed by burns was implemented to kill invasives. Fire has the added benefits of reducing competition, fertilizing the soil and reducing the danger of wild fires. Selective thinning was also used in areas with established, desirable flora. Historically natural fires about every 10 years provide these benefits.

The area to be burned was divided into four sectors and burn day was selected when conditions were most ideal. This was determined by monitoring wind, humidity, temperature and other factors.

Departments that sent teams and equipment on Burn Day, February 2016, were Police, Fire, Emergency Management, Transportation and Public Relations. In addition many volunteers who were trained in prescribed burn management came to help.

One sector at a time was set afire to test smoke conditions. Everything went well and by early evening the burn was over and thought safe to leave. Wharton noted, however, that he couldn't sleep that night and about two went to check on things. Fortunately, all was well.

Wharton's plan and hope that the SCNC plot can, for the next decades, be managed by the method called Ecological Forestry. That would entail volunteers helping him document what is done and what is happening in the forest so that this concept becomes a reality.

## **Athens Area Christmas 2015 Bird Count** *by Eugenia Thompson*

**2015** was somewhat of a slow year for the Athens Christmas Bird Count. Forty-three participants came out but only managed to count 84 species (18,052 individual birds). Count week (the three days on either side of count day) produced only two more species.

Common Grackles were the most numerous (8,103 individuals) with 1,144 Red-winged Blackbirds coming up in second place. American Crows seemed to be everywhere with 696 reported. Only one individual of the following species was counted: Northern Harrier, Merlin, American Woodcock, Great Horned Owl, Gray Catbird, Black-and-White Warbler, and Fox Sparrow. These species were notably absent: Northern Bobwhite, Wilson's Snipe, Eastern Screech-Owl, Barred Owl (one did call during count week), Horned Lark, Purple Finch (one was seen during count week), and Pine Siskin. Two Blue Gray Gnatcatchers seen at Botanical Garden were a nice surprise, the first seen here on a CBC since 1985.

Please mark your December 2016 calendars for the 117th Christmas Bird Count when the date is announced this fall.



**Photo of Southern Toad by Liz Conroy, Athens—  
July 19, 2015**

## **Water for Wee Wildlife** *by Liz Conroy*

Please set out a shallow dish of fresh water for amphibians, reptiles and small mammals during the hot summer. They need water just as much as the birds! The tiny wildlife will appreciate it. Be sure to change the water every few days.

Also, put a bent stick in the dish for any little animal to use to climb out of the dish. Metal can get too hot so try terra cotta saucers (the kind used under potted plants). Thanks!

## Black-bellied Whistling Ducks Make a Flying Visit to Lake Herrick

by Richard Hall

Birding in the rain might not sound fun to anyone other than an Englishman, but rainstorms can often ground migratory species that we don't often get to see in this area. For waterbirds migrating over the large forested areas of middle Georgia, even a small body of water can serve as a temporary oasis to weather out the storm. Flanked by the neatly-mowed intramural fields and the 10 Loop, and subject to high levels of human and canine foot traffic, Lake Herrick might seem an unlikely choice of stopover habitat, but time and again it has hosted a mouth-watering array of local rarities downed by inclement weather including Red Phalarope, American Avocet and Black Tern.

Following intense overnight thunderstorms, on the morning of Thursday April 7th I decided to check the lake, and a quick scan immediately revealed a smattering of waterbirds. My eye was immediately drawn to 2 large ducks sitting on the beach, and on raising my binoculars I was stunned to see that they were Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, a first for Clarke County, and the 200<sup>th</sup> species to be documented at Lake Herrick! After a few frantic phone calls and listserv posts, several people were able to enjoy these birds during their one-day stay, in the company of some other unusual species including a Greater Scaup (species no. 201 for the lake) and a molting Horned Grebe.

While it was a thrill to spot these colorful visitors, the species had been on the radar of many Athens birders following a spring sighting in nearby Watkinsville last year. In recent decades, Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks have expanded their range out of the tropics into central Texas, Florida and Louisiana, and in 2006, the first breeding attempt was documented in Georgia at the Altamaha National Wildlife Refuge (still the stronghold of this species in the state, with counts of 100-200 not unusual). In the following 10 years this species has dramatically increased in number and now breeds in several spots in the Coastal Plain, with the closest breeders being in Augusta.

Other Coastal Plain species such as Anhinga and Swallow-tailed Kite are being seen with increasing frequency north of the Fall Line; these individuals might represent the pioneering colonizers of species expanding their range northwards under climate change. A first site record is always something to celebrate, but might we be getting a glimpse of the 'new normal'?

For more information: Athens Banner-Herald April 9, 2016: "Rare Visitors to Clarke Make Splash at UGA's Lake Herrick" by Lee Shearer (OnlineAthens.com) – Ed.



Photo of Black-bellied Whistling Ducks by Richard Hall, Lake Herrick, Athens—April 7, 2016

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