



The Yellowthroat

Voice of the

Oconee Rivers Audubon Society

November 2012

Vol. 23, No. 9

**Next Meeting:
Thursday, November 1, 7:00 p.m.
Sandy Creek Nature Center**

For the 7:00 p.m. presentation:

Bird Brains: The Intelligence of Animals

Betty Jean Craig will present “Bird Brains: How Cosmo, a Parrot, Has Awakened Us to the Intelligence of Animals.”

Cosmo, a talkative African Grey Parrot, shows how (even 150 years after Darwin’s book, *Origin of Species*) humans underestimate the intelligence and emotions of the other animals sharing our planet. Cosmo talks, jokes and deceives—all traits humans consider unique to our species.

Craig will discuss how we are mistaken in our assumptions that humans are uniquely capable of thought and feeling.

Dr. Craig is Professor Emerita of Comparative Literature and Director Emerita of the Willson Center for Humanities and Arts at The University of Georgia (UGA). She has written books in the fields of literature, politics, art, and the history of ideas, including a biography of ecologist Eugene Odum. Her most recent book is *Conversations with Cosmo: At Home with an African Grey Parrot*. She writes a Sunday column for the Athens Banner-Herald, “Cosmo Talks.”

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.



Photo of speaker Betty Jean Craig (right) and *The Yellowthroat* editor Liz Conroy (left) by Teddie Lohmeir

Save This Date - Annual Christmas Bird Count on Saturday, December 15, 2012

by Mary Case

The annual Christmas Bird Count is Saturday December 15, 2012. This is a nationwide count of birds during the time from December 14, 2012 to January 6, 2013.

You do not have to be an experienced birder to help count with one of the 15 groups covering the Athens area count circle. (It is an excellent learning experience for beginning birders).

If you would like to join us in the count, please contact Mary Case by email: mecase@uga.edu or Eugenia Thompson by email: erobertthom@bellsouth.net by Thursday, December 6 so we can assign you to a group.

If you could come to the Oconee Rivers Audubon Meeting on Thursday, December 6 at 7:00 p.m. at Sandy Creek Nature Center you will be able to meet your count leader.

Also, please note that the beginning and end times are up to each of the group leaders—another good reason to meet with your count leader ahead of time.

September 2012 Clarke County eBird Sightings Summary

by Richard Hall

September 2012 was an astonishing month for Clarke County, with 134 species reported to eBird compared with 117 in 2011 and 121 in 2010. Among them were two first county records: a Stilt Sandpiper at the Golf Course Pond on 13th (JM) and a Clay-colored Sparrow at the ACC landfill on 21st – 22nd (RH).

The State Botanical Garden held a host of interesting birds concentrated along the powerline and privet eradication area, starting with a Philadelphia Vireo (a new county early date) on 5th (RH, MJ) and a Yellow-bellied Flycatcher on 6th (MB, JH).

Interesting warblers included Golden-winged and Wilson's Warblers found on 10th (JMS), and Nashville and Cerulean Warblers (a new county late date for the latter) on 11th (MB, RH).

A duo of tricky *Empidonax* flycatchers were finally confirmed with photos and sound recordings to be the second county record of Alder Flycatcher, and an accompanying Least Flycatcher (JM, RH). Finally, a juvenile Black-Billed Cuckoo showed at close range on 23rd.

New county late dates were recorded for Semipalmated Plover at the Golf Course Pond until 9th (MB, RH), Least Sandpiper at Lake Chapman on 20th (MJ), Eastern Kingbird at the South Milledge fields on 20th (RH), Little Blue Heron (a long-staying immature bird) at the Oxbow Lake until 22nd (RH), Kentucky Warbler in the State Botanical Garden until 26th (MB), and a Canada Warbler on Cook's Trail on 30th (JH).

Some noteworthy flyover sightings included 5 Wood Storks (second county record) over the UGA campus on 6th (MB), a Merlin over upper Cook's Trail on 22nd (RH), a Peregrine at the ACC landfill on 24th (TH, JS) and 7 Horned Larks over the South Milledge fields on 26th (MB).

Two young Grasshopper Sparrows at the ACC landfill on 21st (MB, JH, BKOG) may indicate successful local breeding. Backyard birdbath-watching paid off for MJ when a Gray-cheeked Thrush, Cape May Warbler and Nashville Warbler all stopped by on 28th.

Signs of impending winter included an exceptionally early backyard Pine Siskin on 5th (BKOG), a Loggerhead Shrike at the South Milledge fields on 16th (RH) and a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker on Cook's Trail on 30th (JH).

Observers: Mirko Basen, Richard Hall, Jim Hanna, Theresa Hartz, Mitchell Jarrett, Joel McNeal, Bill and Karla O'Grady, Georgann Schmalz, John Mark Simmons.



Photo of Black-billed Cuckoo by Richard Hall

A Bird's Eye View of Climate Change

summary of October meeting by Carole Ludwig

Thanks to Dr. Robert Cooper, a professor at UGA's Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources, for presenting the October program, **A Bird's Eye View of Climate Change**. His talk was based on research he and his students are conducting on Black-throated Blue Warblers (BTBW) in the southern Appalachians at the Coweeta LTER station.

This species was selected because it migrates from the Caribbean, is a scrub nester, and feeds primarily on caterpillars. As the mean temperature has risen over the last thirty years, 1100 of 1500 species have shifted their ranges—80% of them in the predicted northern direction.

When it comes to breeding, feeding young and perhaps raising a second clutch, Cooper said, "Timing is everything." Caterpillars are an excellent food source and important to fledgling health. Their emergence is based on temperature, and the birds should be raising their young at the peak of this food abundance.

Coweeta study plots varied from 900 to 1350 meters elevation. Caterpillar emergence occurs 2 to 3 weeks earlier at lower elevations than at higher. (Elevation gradient is a surrogate for climate variation). BTBW populations were observed to be more stable at higher elevations.

Interestingly, the number of young per female was about the same at all elevations, but fledglings had significantly lower body weight at the lower elevations. This was attributed to fewer highly nutritious caterpillars being available. Cooper added that other factors need to be studied, and that NASA has agreed to fund part of this research to help students learn how to study climate change.

Smashing Barbs for Birds *by Randy Elmore*

Today we are learning much more about the impact of outdoor sports on the environment and its flora and fauna.

Reflecting for a moment, quite a list of potential dangers to plants and animals come to mind. Lead, from shot shells can be lethal for water fowl; lead fishing weights can harm living things in streams and lakes. Harmful plants, insects, and diseases can be spread by fishers from one body of water to another. Boats and live wells must be cleaned and felt wading boots rinsed in salt water or bleach.

While fly fishing for trout on Smith Creek, an incident triggered this following reflection: Looking over my head for limbs before casting, something odd caught my eye. It was an Eastern Phoebe—a member of the Family Tyrannidae (Tyrant Flycatchers). It appeared to have been caught on a limb and had died.

Looking closer, as the perfectly preserved specimen twisted slowly in the light breeze and bright, late evening sun, I noticed the gleam of monofilament line extending from the bird's mouth to a limb three feet above it.

Closer inspection revealed two fly rigs in the tree, about 15 feet up, out of reach, with little chance for retrieval. The bird had eaten the smaller fly which was attached three feet below a large, white stimulator embedded in a stout limb.

This was one of the most haunting scenes that I had ever encountered. I have thought about the bird often. What to make of it? Do we need to make a greater effort to retrieve our flies? Would a smashed barb (the barb on a hook bent completely over) have saved the bird's life? Is an occasional dead bird a price that must be paid for the enjoyment of fly fishing (like road kills)? Should the bird be considered a free meal for a hawk or owl, part of nature's recycling plan? I suppose each fisher will have his or her own perspective.

A couple years ago, I started smashing all my barbs, including those on my bass and crappie hooks. Some of my bass weights are tungsten, and the dead bird has inspired me to add non-lead weights to my trout gear.

Oh, and I am going to make a stronger effort to retrieve small, realistic flies from trees and bushes. After all, it makes sense that different birds would be attracted to such deadly flies—especially members of the flycatcher family.

Eco-Haiku *by Robert Wyatt*

A ripple and a swirl—
I cast my fine line close by.
A hungry bass bites!

Creating Thickets for Birds *by Jeff Jackson*

If you don't have songbirds nesting near your house a possible reason is a shortage of thickets for nesting and escape.

The current taste in the way a suburban backyard should look features closely mowed lawn, trees pruned of lower branches to the height of the eaves, and a few manicured bushes and patches of flowers that were advertised as being "good for birds and butterflies."

The backyard should be clean and clear and not show evidence of shiftless husbandry. Usually the bushes are birdless, especially during summer, unless you maintain a feeder. This sort of landscaping is ideal for suburban conformists, but if you live in the country, or in a neighborhood free of social pressure, you may have the opportunity to forget convention and provide quality nesting habitat for shrub and thicket nesting birds.

Some of the birds that nest in thickets within 50 yards of our house are Yellow-Breasted Chat, Indigo Bunting, Brown Thrasher, White-eyed Vireo, Mockingbird, and Catbird.

To establish a thicket, select a favorite small tree such as a parsley hawthorn, rusty blackhaw, or sparkleberry. Use it as a starting point. I began a thicket project several years ago when I discovered a rusty blackhaw seedling in our woods.

It seemed not to have a good future as it was growing under the parent tree. I dug it up and planted it near the house about 20 feet from a living room window. Later, I added a couple of sparkleberries. Over the years, Virginia creeper and moonseed vines volunteered to make the thicket denser. All of these plants produce berries for birds, but the main value of this thicket cover is for escape and security.

Once I watched a Sharp-shinned Hawk pursue a Northern Cardinal in the thicket. The cardinal just kept flitting about within the thicket, always maintaining a distance of a couple of yards. Despite the hawk's efforts the cardinal sat tight. After several minutes of chasing, the hawk gave up and left.

Thickets improve the value of a nearby feeding area. When our little grandson comes to visit, we go to the deck and call, "Here birds, here birds." Then we scatter shelled sunflower seed fragments on the deck and observe which birds arrive.

During the summer the resident Tufted Titmice, Chickadees, a Towhee or two, and two pairs of Northern Cardinals will appear.

In the winter we have an abundance of winter visitors. When the food is gone the birds scatter into the woods or move to the thicket, where they wait for more.

Oconee Audubon Society
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Call for Volunteers—Weed Warriors

Exotic plant species, such as English ivy, privet and bamboo, must be removed from Memorial Park to allow native plants and trees to thrive. Volunteers are needed on the first and third Saturdays of the month.

For the 2012 holiday season: November 3, 17 and December 1, 15 (light rain or shine). Hours: 9:30 a.m. –12:30 p.m. Park in the upper parking lot by Bear Hollow Wildlife Trail off Gran Ellen Drive in Athens. Walk around behind the administration buildings and look for signs. Long pants, closed-toe shoes, work gloves, and water are recommended. Email: ACC Leisure Service Volunteer Coordinator Summer Blackwell Summer.Blackwell@athensclarkecounty.com

Visit the Weed Warriors Facebook page for updates:
<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Memorial-ParkBirchmore-Trail-Weed-Warriors/182049889984>

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