



# The Yellowthroat

Voice of the

Oconee Rivers Audubon Society

October 2014

Vol. 25, No. 8

## Next Meeting: Thursday, October 2, 6:30 p.m. UGA's Odum School of Ecology

Following the 6:30 reception in the lobby there will be a 7:00 p.m. presentation:

### The Conservation of Eagles in Georgia

The eagle population in Georgia is recovering from historic lows, but these magnificent raptors still face challenges. Jim Ozier, nongame program manager with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR) wildlife division, will discuss the state's Bald Eagle nesting population and Golden Eagle migratory obstacles in "Conservation of Eagles in Georgia—Successes and Challenges."

Bald Eagles were probably once common in Georgia but suffered severe declines into the 1970s, when there were no known nesting pairs in the state. The population is recovering, with 188 known nesting territories statewide in the 2014 season. Ozier's talk will include information about cooperating with landowners who have nesting sites and about diseases that are affecting America's national symbol. Ozier also will reveal how important the Southern Appalachian Mountains are for wintering Golden Eagles, which nest in eastern Canada, and the increasing obstacles these birds face in their annual migration.

Ozier, who has a master's degree in wildlife biology from the University of Georgia, has worked with the DNR for more than 25 years, joining the agency's Nongame and Endangered Wildlife Program in 1992. He has worked with landowners and government agencies on wildlife management, the conservation of rare species, and protecting sensitive habitats.

**Directions to UGA's Ecology Building parking lot from Loop 10 bypass:** Exit at College Station Rd and turn west toward campus. Turn right on East Campus Rd and drive north. Turn left at second traffic light onto W. Green St. Turn right into the S-07 parking lot; the Ecology Building is on the north side of the parking lot behind a row of trees.

## Sightings Reported at September Meeting

**Ruby-throated Hummingbirds**, Birch Valley, Athens, Art Conway, 9/4/14

**Great Horned Owl**, Old Farmington Rd, Oconee County, Carole Ludwig and Mark Freeman, 9/4/14

**Barred Owl**, near Cleveland Rd, Clarke County, Alison Huff, 9/2/14

**Common Nighthawk**, Dunwoody Drive, Athens, Corey McQuinn, 9/1/14

**Red-headed Woodpecker**, Old Edwards Rd, Arnoldsville, Georgia, Leila Dasher

**Barred Owl**, near Tallahassee Rd, Clarke County (heard in the evenings in September near house), Liz Conroy 9/14

## Fall Bird Walks (in town) \*

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

**Sept. 27** SCNC/Cook's Trail Cleanup (Bring a trash bag for picking up litter on the way out while still birding).

**Oct. 05** Whitehall Forest (S.Milledge & Whitehall Rd.) Attendees for this walk must be on time. Meet outside the gate and caravan to Flinchum's Phoenix. You may leave at any time as the gate opens automatically from the inside.

**Oct. 18** State Botanical Garden (Upper Parking Lot)

**Oct. 25** Sandy Creek Park

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

**Oct. 04 6:00 a.m.** Cochran Shoals.

\* Check ORAS listserv announcements for where to meet and for any changes regarding the event.

## **Sacrifices for Flight** by Nancy Miorelli

Every day we see birds take to the skies, whether it's the Red-tailed Hawk soaring above the highway or the little Chickadee that's darting between the trees and the feeder. What adaptations do these animals have that let them take to the skies?

### **Picky Eaters:**

While there are many animals that can handle the rough, leafy, vegetation, like the deer eating your rose bushes, there is very little nutrition in leaves. Leaves are tough, woody, fibrous and generally nutrient poor when compared to their weight. Because of this, birds physically cannot eat enough leaves to power their bodies and if they tried, would be too heavy to fly. Poor nutritional value combined with the sheer weight of the vegetation is why birds must eat high quality foods that contain mostly sugars and proteins. Birds eat nectar, berries, nuts, insects, snakes, lizards, and rodents--the Power Bars of the animal kingdom.

### **High Metabolism:**

Flying is difficult and strenuous. Therefore, it is necessary for birds to have a metabolism that can keep up with the job. Large raptors conserve energy by gliding on the thermals. Most songbirds in the summer complete their activities in the morning to avoid the afternoon heat. Hummingbirds, are so small and their metabolism is so quick that they must go into a sort of hibernation called "torpor" every night. If they did not do this, hummingbirds would starve to death before the morning due to their fast metabolism. While this may seem inconvenient, this fast metabolism is what maintains the bird's energy and stamina for flight.

### **Shedding the Weight:**

You can imagine that if birds are concerned with excess weight of vegetation, then they have some serious adaptations to help them shed the pounds everywhere else. Birds have hollow bones filled with air pockets to help make them lighter. Many of the bones only have crosslinking structures to give them strength and it's in these pockets and a few specialized bones where the bone marrow is made.

Another way birds shed the weight is by their lack of teeth. Teeth are heavy and frankly, unnecessary to the modern bird's lifestyle. Birds do have a gene to make teeth, as can be seen by previous toothy bird ancestors, but the gene is silenced in the genome of modern birds. When scientists turned the gene back on in chickens, the birds developed sharp predatory teeth.

### **Mating Rituals:**

Many animals have elaborate fighting displays whereby the female watches a couple of male suitors duke it out until one of them is the winner. These fights can often be dangerous for the losing competitor, but usually the loser survives. Because birds' bones are so fragile, the loser would most likely die, if not immediately then later, by a predator. This is the reason it is believed that birds have such

spectacular mating displays. Males cannot compete directly with each other through feats of physical strength, so they complete for the females with lavish displays and gifts.

This article focuses on birds, but these concepts can be applied to other flying things as well, including insects, bats, and airplanes. All have specialized diets, insects, fruit, or high octane fuel, high metabolisms, ways to reduce weight, and complex mating or advertising schemes.

## **Monitoring and Mapping Habitats with Flying Cameras on Amazing Drones**

*summary of September meeting by Liz Conroy*

Thanks to Tommy Jordan, Director of the Center for Geospatial Research (CGR) at UGA's Dept. of Geography in the Franklin College of Arts and Sciences, for his discussion on the use of drones in mapping habitats. His talk included images of the marsh habitat, water and land around Wormsloe Plantation.\* (See info below from the website: [gastateparks.org/wormsloe/](http://gastateparks.org/wormsloe/)).

Jordan noted that drones, often called UAVs—unmanned air vehicles—took the images with remote controlled cameras attached to them.

He said that these "sweet little drones" are improving fast in both the fixed wing and rotary wing types. One of the first questions to ask before buying a drone is: How much lift does it have? This determines "payload" or the amount of weight it can carry—an important issue in terms of cameras!

Another question to ask is: How long can it fly? This issue is especially important for anyone interested in mapping large areas of habitat. "Drones are valuable for use in places you can't get to easily, like out in the marshes and dunes," Jordan said. Detailed images are important in many areas, he added, not only for mapping wildlife habitat, but for historic preservation, archeology, and buildings and monuments.

The noise that the drone makes sounds like loud, angry bees. Jordan showed a video of a drone flying over an Osprey's nest, and the shadow of the adult Osprey fleeing the nest was clearly visible. This raised a question from an ORAS member regarding guidelines for the use of drones around birds and wildlife and the need for education in this matter.

\* A breathtaking avenue sheltered by live oaks and Spanish moss leads to the tabby ruins of Wormsloe, the colonial estate of Noble Jones (1702-1775). Jones was the humble carpenter who arrived in Georgia in 1733 with James Oglethorpe and the first group of settlers from England. Wormsloe's tabby ruin is the oldest standing structure in Savannah. Jones died at the beginning of the American Revolution, but his descendants sustained Wormsloe until the state of Georgia acquired most of the plantation in 1973. Today, visitors can interact with the costumed interpreters during programs and events, and view a museum with artifacts unearthed at Wormsloe, as well as a short film about the site and the founding of Georgia.

## Message from the President *by Richard Hall*

With its cooler temperatures and the beauty of the turning leaves, October is a wonderful month for birding in Athens! It's a time when we say goodbye to the last of our summer migrants and welcome the first winter arrivals to our backyards. The first week of the month is still an excellent time for seeing warblers on their way to the tropics, before they are replaced by the horde of wintering Yellow-rumped Warblers. It's also peak time to observe migrating Gray-cheeked and Swainson's Thrushes feasting on dogwood and Virginia creeper berries.

The State Botanical Garden and Cook's Trail are excellent places to check for lingering migrants. Mid-month sees a push of migrating sparrows, and the South Milledge Fields offer opportunities to study multiple species side-by-side. Check among the Savannah Sparrows carefully for scarce species such as White-crowned and Lincoln's. By the month's end familiar winter visitors such as Dark-eyed Junco, White-throated Sparrow and Ruby-crowned Kinglet will be back in our yards in numbers. It's also a great time to look for migrating waterfowl at Lake Herrick (UGA) and Lake Chapman (Sandy Creek Park).

PS. The GOS fall meeting takes place on Jekyll Island on the weekend of October 10-13, 2014. The GOS meeting is for birders of all abilities. It's a great way for newbie birders to meet up with other birders.

For more details, please visit: [www.gos.org](http://www.gos.org)



**Photo of Gray Fox by Richard Hall at S. Milledge Intramural Fields, UGA campus—August 30, 2014**

## Scat Tells a Superb Story *by Liz Conroy*

Happiness on a hike is discovering a pile of predator's scat on the trail, preferably before stepping into it. Sometimes known as "the calling card" of wild animals, their droppings are so much more. Think of scat as a current events card created by passing critters. What they ate, when they passed by on the trail, what species they are, and the territorial statement they are making: all of this is revealed by the lowly pile on the path. In addition, as the late Eugene Odum once explained to me, the signs of native predators in an area indicate a healthy ecosystem—there is a natural balance occurring and the herbivores are being kept in check. Scat serves as a particularly interesting sign because of the stories it tells about each passing predator.

My personal joy is in probing a pile loaded with persimmon seeds. Addicted to this wild fruit growing on trees around my neighborhood, I want to be sure there are plenty of native persimmon trees growing for future generations of people and animals. Happily, I reach in my back pocket for a plastic bag from the Athens Banner-Herald and scoop the poop to plant in a better place. I know who left this scat that's full of shiny, brown seeds about the size of almonds.

In the early morning, sometimes a raucous yipping, yowling and high-pitched howling floats on the cool, predawn air from the woods and fields near Tallassee Road. Or, the wild wailings whip up from ridges above the banks of the Middle Oconee River. Who needs walking zombies for eerie entertainment when the wild coyotes call in the night?

Coyotes have scat like a small dog, only it's loaded with a variety of non-dog foods. Hairs of mice, rats, chipmunks and other rodents often stick out from the load, along with other undigested remains of snacks and meals.

Sometimes, insect parts make the scat shimmer in the morning sun, especially when the insects eaten were green June Beetles (*Cotinus nitida*). A few autumns ago, I got out my plastic bag to pick up a dried, old patty of poop and proceeded to pry it off the ground. The center split open and something round and small began slowly moving toward me. As if dazed and confused, a dirty, yet still very-much-alive and wonderfully iridescent, June beetle crept forth into the sunlight. Apparently, it had been swallowed whole, survived the digestive juices inside the coyote's stomach, came out from under the tail and lived to tell the tale. I put Jonah the June bug gently into the grass and scooped the remaining seed-packed scat into my bag.

I had read that seeds passing through the gut of an animal are much more ready to sprout. The digestive processes scarify the seed coat, so the embryo can break through the tough outer covering with greater ease. Moreover, the surrounding scat provides nearby fertilizer for the little seed. So these poop-covered persimmon seeds are precious and promptly put into soil in sunny areas where they can grow. Hikers – take time to scoop the poop to get the latest trail news from our wild brothers and sisters!

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**Photo of Warbling Vireo by Richard Hall at Lake Herrick in Clarke County—August 30, 2014**

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