



# The Yellowthroat

Voice of the

Oconee Rivers Audubon Society

October 2018

Vol. 29, No. 8

## Next Meeting: Thursday, October 4, 7:00 p.m. Sandy Creek Nature Center in Athens

For the 7:00 p.m. presentation:

### Importance of ACC Sustainability Office

Athens-Clarke County (ACC) Sustainability Officer, Andrew Saunders, will discuss the work being done by the ACC sustainability office and its importance to Athens area residents.

Among other activities, the sustainability office has led the charge on solar development, energy sustainability and the protection of greenspaces in Athens.

To be successful, these efforts involve collaboration with a variety of stakeholders including private landowners, local non-profits, and government agencies.

Saunders will describe what it takes to implement these initiatives and why the work done by the office of sustainability matters to all ACC residents.

**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 Education & Visitor Center building is a short way down the road on your right.

## Fall Bird Walks (in town)

Bird walks are from **8 a.m.-11a.m. or noon**. However, attendees may leave early. Dress for the weather and wear sturdy shoes. Bring water. (Please check ORAS announcements for any changes to this schedule and be aware that some new bird walks may be added later).

- Sept. 29 : **Whitehall (be on time for this walk)**
- Oct. 13: **Vulture Festival (Landfill)\*\***
- Oct. 14: **State Botanical Garden (Day Chapel)**
- Oct. 21: **Oconee Hill Cemetery**
- Oct. 27: **Sandy Creek Park (Campsite Dr.)**

\*\*ACC Vulture Festival” is Sat. Oct. 13, 30 from 8:00 a.m. until 1:00 p.m. at the ACC Landfill 5700 Lexington Rd. This event celebrates nature’s clean-up crew (the vultures) with family-friendly activities: bird walk, kids' games, recycling opportunities, landfill tour, and a visit from a captive vulture. Please note that the bird walk is 8:00 a.m. until 9:00 a.m. and the festival is 9:00 a.m. until noon.

Email: [recycle@accgov.com](mailto:recycle@accgov.com) Call: 706-613-3512 Or visit: [www.accgov.com/recycling](http://www.accgov.com/recycling)

## Fall Field Trip/GOS Meeting

**Oct. 05-07: Georgia Ornithological Society Fall Meeting**  
The GOS fall meeting takes place on Jekyll Island. Birders of all abilities are welcome. For more information, visit: <https://www.gos.org/>

**Oct. 20: 6:00 a.m. Cochran Shoals** (More information on where to meet will be available in October).

## The Inspiration and Beauty of the Rose-breasted Grosbeak *by Robert Wyatt*

John Yow in his 2009 book *The Armchair Birder* uses words such as “beauty,” “eye popper,” and “gorgeous” to describe the Rose-breasted Grosbeak. Indeed, this bird is a sight to behold as well as a joy to hear. Yow describes the sound as “like a robin that has taken voice lessons.” No wonder the Rose-breasted Grosbeak is among the favorites of many birders.

My high school biology teacher, Lois Templeton Goforth, was no exception. She proudly declared it to be her favorite bird by far. As a botanist, I was more interested in her favorite plant, which was the Carolina Silverbell, a tree with which I was familiar and agreed was a beauty. But it was not until much later that I saw my first Rose-breasted Grosbeak. I learned that Yow was right to say, “Wow!”

In March of 1997, I presented Lois Goforth with a small token of my gratitude for her inspiration: a signed lithograph of a painting of a Rose-breasted Grosbeak. She thanked me by sharing the following story:

“In Berea, Kentucky, one Sunday morning the ornithology class [at Berea College] hiked across a meadow, then a pasture where every blade of grass drooped with dew, on our way to the top of a pinnacle named ‘Dead Horse Knob.’

Without the comfort of hiking clothes or gear, I sometimes wonder what kind of shoes I was wearing. Yet the excitement of the moment compensated for those incidentals. It was there on the crest of the ‘Knob’ that I saw in the top of a scraggy ole white oak, still leafless in the cool spring air, my first Rose-breasted Grosbeak. Somehow my foolish, young mind was so impressed by the bird. It radiated serenity and a confidence that all’s right with the world.”

For the past few years I have been tracking the annual spring migration of these birds by simply noting on the calendar when they arrive and depart from my feeder in western Oconee County. I started in 2013 and have been following them until this year, missing only 2016 when, as far as I know, they followed an alternative flight path.

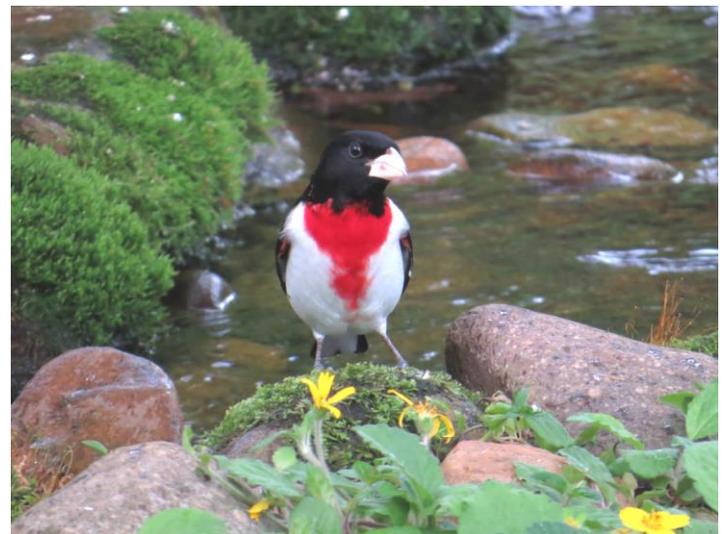
My wife, Ann Stoneburner, and I have spent many blissful hours watching the birds feed. Unlike most of our year-round visitors (e.g., cardinals, house finches, chickadees, and titmice), these birds sit for long spells on the feeder, mostly excluding other birds.

My five years of data show the average date of arrival for these birds is 24 April, with a range from 20-28 April. The average departure date is 6 May, with a range from 3-10 May. The average number of days in residence is 12, with a range from 7 to 18. In 2014, when the birds stayed around for 18 days, I was able to confirm that at least six different birds were involved because on one occasion I saw four males at once and, on another occasion, two females at once. Of course, it’s very likely the birds are turning over more

frequently than I can detect, and many more actually moved through the area.

Although I have not kept detailed records of the birds returning in the fall, I can state they are also very regular in their visits. In addition to feeding heavily on my black oil sunflower seeds, the Rose-breasted Grosbeaks also eat many fruits from nearby dogwood trees. My impression, however, is that they do not stay as long as they do in the spring.

Lois Goforth died in 2010, but the birds remind me of her every time they visit us. She also inspired a number of generations of students at Statesville High School in North Carolina to continue in biology. Among her protégés is Marcus B. Simpson, who became a physician and also authored *Birds of the Blue Ridge Mountains*, published in 1992. The book is dedicated “To Lois T. Goforth, whose teaching has inspired so many in the field of biology and natural sciences.”



**Photo of Rose-breasted Grosbeak by Richard Hall, in his backyard in Athens, Georgia—April 26, 2018**

## Habitat Restoration at SCNC

The Northeast Georgia Invasive Plant Cooperative is leading habitat restoration workdays during the month of October at Sandy Creek Nature Center (SCNC).

**Monday, October 8th, 10:00 AM – 1:00 PM**  
**Thursday, October 18th, 3:30 PM – 6:30 PM**  
**Saturday, October 27th, 9:00 AM – 12:00 PM**

Volunteers will clear invasive Chinese Privet and Autumn Olive from along the Clay Pit Trail using hand saws and pruners. Meet us in the parking lot outside the Visitor Center. Wear closed-toed shoes, long pants, hat, and a long-sleeved shirt and bring water. To sign up to volunteer: <https://www.givepulse.com/group/130088-Athens-Land-Trust>

## **Peregrinations: Little St. Simons Island**

by *Richard Hall*

Where much of the eastern U.S. seaboard has seen large scale habitat conversion and development, the Georgia coast still boasts vast expanses of saltmarsh fronted by a string of unspoiled, golden-sanded barrier islands. Therefore I jumped at the chance to spend a few days on beautiful Little Saint Simons Island as part of their spring birding festival. Little Saint Simons is a privately owned island comprising a hunting lodge and cabins now run as a luxurious ecolodge, and over 10,000 acres of wildlife habitat, which in 2015 was preserved in a permanent conservation easement by the owners, former U.S. Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson and his wife Wendy.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the island is the expanse of natural and managed freshwater wetlands fed by the Floridan aquifer; together with the maritime forest, dunes, saltmarsh and seven miles of beach, the island is a microcosm of coastal habitats all easily reachable by a short ride by bike or in one of the open-backed trucks. The diversity of habitats is reflected in the astonishing variety of resident and migratory birds.

Although our mid-May visit was a little too late to coincide with the island's most famous visitors, the overwintering Long-billed Curlews, our group racked up an impressive 130 species over our three-day stay.

A typical morning saw us up bright and early for pre-breakfast birding, where we encountered good numbers of late spring migratory land birds including a Yellow-billed Cuckoo fallout and a showy Veery. A fortuitous stop allowed us to discover a Northern Parula nest right over the road; constructed entirely out of Spanish moss and dangling pendulously from a branch, it was hard to believe that this tiny, delicate structure held a clutch of hungry youngsters attended regularly by both parents.

The freshwater impoundments along the Beach Road held Mottled Ducks, Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, and a lone Purple Gallinule, but the highlight was visiting Norm's Pond (named after the huge bull alligator that lives there). The two-story viewing blind gives sublime views over a noisy rookery full of well-grown Snowy and Great Egret chicks, as well as some adorably gangly Anhinga babies. Interestingly, two pairs of Roseate Spoonbills appeared to be engaging in display activity that involved bill snapping, bowing and nibbling at branches (testing out future nest sites?). This striking species only recently began nesting in the state, but I wouldn't be surprised if the first spoonbill babies appear on the island in the next year or two.

The north of the island holds Myrtle Pond, a large freshwater impoundment that hosts nesting Black-necked Stilts and foraging migratory shorebirds. A warm water outflow attracts scores of alligators and offers close encounters with Wood Storks, Glossy Ibis and Roseate Spoonbills. In an early morning visit we enjoyed fabulous views of a pair of

secretive Least Bitterns out in the open. Continuing north and eastwards, the road traverses scrubby sand dunes alive with the song of Painted Buntings and yielded stunning views of a dashing Merlin and a huge eastern diamondback rattlesnake.

The road ends at Sancho Panza Beach, where nesting Wilson's Plovers, Oystercatchers, and Willets are joined by a bonanza of migratory shorebirds, loafing Black Skimmers, and an assortment of terns. Horseshoe crab spawning was in full swing, and we were privileged to see several imperiled Red Knots in their salmon-chested breeding attire, refueling en route to their Arctic breeding grounds. It's heartening to know that this jewel of a barrier island is protected in perpetuity for avian and human visitors alike.



**Photo of Merlin by Richard Hall, Little St. Simons Island, Georgia—May 2018**



**Photo of Roseate Spoonbill courtship by Richard Hall, Little St. Simons Island, Georgia—May 2018**

## Living Along the Wrack Line: Georgia's Critical Role in the Life of a Shorebird

summary of September meeting by Tammy Kemper

Thanks to Tim Keyes and Abby Sterling for their recent talk on shorebird ecology and conservation on the Georgia coast.

The Georgia Coast is a region with incredible habitat for shorebirds, ranging from expansive marshes to barrier island beaches. Keyes and Sterling described shorebird conservation and the recent designation of Georgia's barrier islands as a landscape of hemispheric importance.

Keyes is a wildlife biologist with the nongame conservation section of GA DNR. Sterling is a shorebird biologist with Manomet's Georgia Bight Shorebird Conservation Initiative. They described Georgia's coastline as a great habitat for shorebirds due to its low waves, high tides, lots of inlets, large expanse of salt marsh, huge water shed system, extensive remote beaches with minimum engineering, and few modified inlets.

As a result of this excellent habitat, the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network (WHSRN) designated Georgia's barrier islands as a **Landscape of Hemispheric Importance**, the 100<sup>th</sup> site, in October 2017.

The **Georgia Bight Shorebird Conservation Initiative** was then launched in May 2018 to address specific threats to the shorebirds dependent on the southeastern region of the Atlantic Coast.

Georgia's coast provides habitat for many at risk migrating and breeding shorebirds including American Oystercatchers, Wilson Plovers, Red Knots, Whimbrels, Long-billed Curlews, and Black-bellied Plovers. Keyes noted that about 20-30% of the American Oystercatchers have been banded in order to better track them.

Sterling added that shorebirds connect the world and mentioned the "Whimbrels on the Wing" story of seven Whimbrels tagged with solar-powered transmitters in 2012 on St. Simons Island to better understand and protect them. <https://manometinc.maps.arcgis.com/apps/Cascade/index.html?appid=32f5ed26c89140dd96ae360844625551>

## Rivers Alive! Volunteer on Oct. 20

The Upper Oconee Water Network (UOWN) invites volunteers to wade into the North and Middle Oconee Rivers on Sat. Oct. 20 to help clean up these important waterways.

It's part of an ongoing statewide campaign to clean and preserve more than 70,000 miles of Georgia's rivers. This year is the 20<sup>th</sup> year of the annual clean-up event which helps improve our waterways.

Our rivers and streams provide us with fresh drinking water, wildlife habitat, and recreational opportunities. Let's do our part to take care of them!

In addition, UOWN Water Trails committee will be organizing and on-river (paddle) clean-up. Online sign-up will be available at:

<https://www.athensclarkecounty.com/1381/Rivers-Alive>

## Announcement of Fall Grants for 2018

Fall is time for grant applications! We began accepting grants on September 6. The final deadline is October 31. We anticipate four to six grants will be awarded. For more information, visit: [www.oconeeriversaudubon.org/grant](http://www.oconeeriversaudubon.org/grant)

## SCNC Birdseed Sale – Order by Oct. 15

Buy quality bird seed through SCNC, Inc. (the non-profit organization that supports the Nature Center). Drive through pick-up is Friday, Nov.2 from 3:30 to 5:30 p.m. and Saturday, Nov.3 from 10a.m. to noon. Seniors and anyone with special needs in the Athens area can have their birdseed delivered for free. Pre-orders are accepted until Oct. 15. Call Katie: [706-613-3615 Ext. 235](tel:706-613-3615) or get order forms here: <http://www.sandycreeknaturecenterinc.org/bird-seed-sale>

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