



The Yellowthroat

*Voice of the
Oconee Rivers Audubon Society*

January 2010

Vol. 21 No. 1

Next Meeting

**Thursday, January 7 at 7:00 p.m.
Sandy Creek Nature Center**

Dr. Ron Carroll, professor in the University of Georgia Odum School of Ecology and director for science at the UGA River Basin Center, will discuss “**Global warming consequences for the Georgia coast and for neotropical migrants and what we can do about climate change**” at the January 7 Oconee Rivers Audubon Society meeting.

Dr. Carroll's research interests include conservation biology, sustainable economic development, ecosystem restoration, and invasive species. He played a key role in setting up the Metro Atlanta Flyway Cities Coalition, which is part of a national effort to protect and restore wildlife habitat in key cities throughout the flyways of North America.

Dr. Carroll has conducted conservation research in Latin America, especially Costa Rica, since 1967. He works closely with Ecuador's Maquipucuna Foundation, a 4,500-hectare nature reserve, surrounded by 14,000 hectares of “protected forest,” in the Choco-Andean cloud forest.

He is active in SELVA Foundation, an action-oriented environmental organization that focuses on large river ecosystems and related land use in Latin America. The organization provides concrete and pragmatic solutions to the serious problems affecting vulnerable eco-systems of universal significance with the objective of a secure and harmonious environment for all forms of life.

Sightings

Reported at the December meeting:

- **Cooper's Hawk**, East Athens, Paul & Albie Smith, 12/3/09
- **Greater Yellowlegs, Marbled Godwit, Great Black-backed Gull, Short-billed Dowitchers**, Edisto Island, Alison Huff, 11/26/09
- **7 Wild Turkey, Northern Harrier, Old** Farmington Rd., Mark Freeman & Carole Ludwig, 11/26/09 & 11/27/09

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.

Great Backyard Bird Count

from <http://www.birdsource.org/gbbc/>

Bird watchers coast to coast are invited to take part in the 13th annual Great Backyard Bird Count, Friday, February 12, through Monday, February 15, 2010. Participants in the free event will join tens of thousands of volunteers of all levels of birding experience to count birds in their own backyards, local parks or wildlife refuges.

Each checklist submitted by these "citizen scientists" helps researchers at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the National Audubon Society learn more about how the birds are doing—and how to protect them. Last year, participants turned in more than 93,600 checklists online, creating the continent's largest instantaneous snapshot of bird populations ever recorded.

Invasive Plant Eradication

The Memorial Park invasive plant eradication project is making amazing progress with regular workdays held on the first and third Saturday mornings of each month.

Volunteers should park in front of the park's pink administration building, then walk around to the back of that building. The work site is along the trail, near the wooden foot bridge. Ivy and privet, beware! For details, email Sue Wilde at suewilde@hotmail.com

In the Company of Loons

by Tim Homan

Ontario's Killarney Provincial Park

[continued from last month's newsletter!]

Another evening a loon popped to the surface 20 to 25 feet to starboard of our stationary canoe. Riding high in the water, head smooth and velvety black, eyes wild and blood red, the bold diver graced us with a good long look—an outloud “wow” look—at its beautifully patterned breeding plumage (sexes similar) before slowly quartering away. That close through binoculars, the loon's sunlit plumage looked pure and perfect. With *Gavia immer* as unseen easel, evolution seemed to be seeking the maximum number of stylized but functional black and white patterns it could fit on one bird. We spotted the inadvertent artistry of four: the white necklace around the black throat, the checkerboard back, and the curving black and white stripes on the sides of the breast breaking up into undulating rows of white dots on the black flank. On this particular loon, which held its head high, the lower set of vertical black and white bars appeared much more prominently than usually pictured in field guides. At that close range—on a large, fish-gulping bird with piercing red eyes, black-dagger bill, and wrestler-thick neck—the vertical barring looked far more like a warrior's gorget than a debutante's necklace.

Still another evening we watched, as we had in years past, the comical antics of a territorial loon chasing an intruder—in short, water-walking bursts—all around the middle of the lake and to the far southern shore. Right after hearing the commotion, we observed both birds in an aggressive stance known as the penguin posture: standing on the water by treading their outsized feet, wings raised and held rigid, necks bowed so that their formidable bills pointed directly at each other, a cocked and ready threat. Then, as we continued to drift in the light wind, the interloper loon slightly further away flinched and began a skittering run across the water, closely tailed by the territory holder. Both birds tremoloed and splashed as they sprinted full-steam ahead—feet slapping the water, wings still upraised and rigid—with surprising speed for about 30 yards before they stopped.

The chaser pulled up short, keeping the same safe, stare-down distance as before. The two loons resumed their penguin postures while the defender politely waited for the intruder to run for its life again. They ran again and again at quick intervals—shorter sprint, longer, shorter again—splashing and tremoloing and producing an impressively large wake for a pair of eight-pound birds. The chaser never tagged or touched the chasee. Each time the defender stopped and resumed its standing, on-guard position at approximately the same distance. When the territorial loon had herded the pretender close to the southern shore, after perhaps five

or six minutes, they quit their manic running. The victor and still reigning champion of its territory swam back to the deep water in the center of the lake.

We had witnessed a common behavior known as territorial chasing, an aggressive defense which can last up to 10 to 15 minutes and can be initiated by either sex. The act of treading water to a swirling froth in order to stand up is known as penguin dancing. The interloper invites attack by beginning a run; the defender dashes closely behind the intruder, which stops its run only when the defender slows down. What looks like innate good sportsmanship is nature's way of giving the challenger a genetically encoded way out. Early in the breeding season, when territories are at stake and hormone levels have topped off the tank, territorial disputes can and do lead to injury or death from puncture wounds. But by August, with territories long sorted out and hormone levels ebbing toward increased sociability, territorial chasing becomes more of a highly ritualized defensive display designed to prevent injury or death to either combatant, providing the intruder shows the required submissiveness.

Loons were with us every day, constant as camp chores. They gave voice to Killarney's wilderness day and night. Even our midnight dehydrations were occasionally completed to the accompaniment of loon wail. Despite the fact that we saw four bears, three of them up close, it was the loon—the fast-flying, slow-wailing, splash-landing loon—that stitched our trip together—all the lakes, marshes, and mountains; all the clouds, cliffs, and forests; all the miles, portages, and campsites.

Gavia immer gave us, in concert with streak-of-fire meteors and the bright-night sprawl of stars innumerable, a magical-moment sendoff, one we will remember well into our dotage. We were camped at Killarney Lake, at the tip of a south-shore peninsula pointing north toward the white-quartzite mountains—the South La Cloche Range—rimming the lake's northern shore. After our final evening paddle, we walked out to a shelving slab of glacier-planed granite, our star-watching rock. There, away from the blood-ravenous mosquitoes back in camp, we sipped our last, bottle-emptying ration of 80-proof ground softener while waiting for the long northern twilight to fade away.

The star-domed sky was cold-front clear and cloudless. Its clarity was a pleasing novelty to Southerners living in the humid, heavily populated Piedmont. Page's star chart mentioned that our last night was the beginning of the Perseid Meteor Shower, best seen, of course, from 2 to 5 a.m. By 9:30 the Big Dipper was cradling a cupful of black tea out in front of us to the north. Vega, straight overhead, and Arcturus to the west—celestial lighthouses guiding our eyes to nearby constellations—shone brightest amid the throngs of dimmer stars visible from our rocky perch. A little later

the Corona Borealis filled out its circle with the spent light of distant suns. Straight out from the Big Dipper's lip steadfast Polaris stood post: the pivot point of the sky-wide night wheel, the sailors' stay-at-home star of dead reckoning.

Sometime before 11:00, shortly after our ninth meteor buzzed the Big Dipper's handle, a loon began to wail—loud, plaintive, and long winded—from the wide western part of the lake. The wails, a sound so primeval the night itself could have created them, echoed across the starlit lake from the Pleistocene—better known to mastodon than modern man. Alone on our rock, tired and tipsy and exhilarated beneath the immensity and majesty of the night sky, the evocative calls touched a hard-wired wildness still crouching within easy reach. To our receptive emotions, the wails were both unbearably beautiful and forlorn, the perfect musical lament for the mortality-shadowed human.

After more than a dozen drawn-out, wolf-howl wails, the loon suddenly stopped. But before the night could reassert its silence, multiple loons answered with tremolo-laughter from the island-studded eastern end of the lake. As the equally loud tremolos continued, lively solace after the dirge, the best meteor yet—a long slash of light, the Cherokee's "fire panther"—leapt across the sky.

The tremolos soon ceased. We laid back and closed our eyes. Then we slowly got to our feet and gave the earth and star-stippled sky a standing ovation for the streaking light and loon music show.

Salmonella Study

by Page Luttrell

Last winter an increased number of songbird die-offs caused by the bacterium *Salmonella typhimurium* occurred in Georgia and around the Southeast. The primary species affected were Pine Siskins, American Goldfinches, and Northern Cardinals but it also caused illness in Red-winged Blackbirds, House Finches, and Purple Finches. Dr. Kevin Keel of the Southeastern Cooperative Wildlife Disease Study, the University of Georgia is conducting a field study on the prevalence and strain variability of Salmonella in backyard birds and is looking for volunteers who would allow their backyard birds to be trapped and sampled. All healthy birds will be released unharmed.

Dr. Keel spoke to ORAS last spring about the outbreak and the need for monitoring this disease. If you are interested in participating in this study, contact Dr. Keel at mkkeel@uga.edu or phone 706-542-1741.

What You Can Do!

summarized by Maggie Nettles

Charlie Muise, Georgia's Important Bird Area Coordinator, talked at the December meeting about "**Bird Conservation and You**," emphasizing ways we can help protect the birds we love.

First in importance, he said, is the need to protect habitat. Habitat destruction and degradation remains the primary problem that birds face. He reminded us that migrating birds need numerous habitats to survive: breeding grounds, staging grounds, migration stopovers, and wintering grounds.

Habitat loss, he noted, involves more than obvious bulldozing. It also includes the consequences of invasive species like the hemlock woolly adelgid, the dogwood anthracnose, and the chestnut blight—brought in by people who wanted an exotic evergreen, a pink dogwood, a European chestnut. The result? Mass death of native trees that provided prime food and shelter for birds. He also talked about invasive species like privet that cut down on the diversity of plants needed for year-round food and shelter.

The problems result from growth—population and economic growth—for which he had no magic bullet. Instead Charlie urges us to focus on multiple solutions. First, he reminded us to reduce, reuse, and recycle—with the emphasis on reducing, using less.

Individuals who want to dedicate their time to helping improve the future for birds have lots of options. They can participate in Christmas Bird Counts, Breeding Bird Surveys, Great Backyard Bird Counts, Project FeederWatch, Citizen Science projects, and reporting sightings on eBird. They can also participate in active management of habitats by removing exotics and restoring native plants.

Charlie runs two Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship (MAPS) banding stations in the Atlanta area, including Panola State Park and Joe Kurz Wildlife Management Area. Volunteers can learn how to mist net, measure, and band birds. To participate, contact Charlie Muise at cmmbirds@yahoo.com or 678-967-9924.

Give the Gift of Audubon!

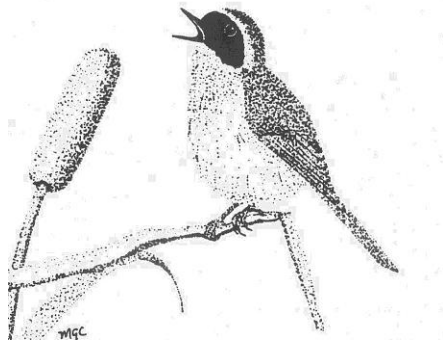


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The Georgia Important Bird Areas program is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to protecting the most significant bird habitats in the state.

To make a tax-deductible contribution, please make your check out to "AAS" and write "IBA" in the subject line. For more information or to volunteer, contact Charlie Muise at cmmbirds@yahoo.com or 678-967-9924, or see the IBA website:

<http://www.atlantaudubon.org/iba/>

You can also combine your online searching and shopping with donating to the Georgia IBA program by using [GoodSource.com](http://www.goodsources.com) as your search engine and [GoodShop.com](http://www.goodshop.com) as your shopping portal with the non-profit designation of "Audubon Society – Atlanta."

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