



The Yellowthroat

*Voice of the
Oconee Rivers Audubon Society*

January 2008

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**Next Meeting:
Thursday, January 3, 7:00 p.m.
Sandy Creek Nature Center**

Shan Cammack, Georgia Department of Natural Resources Wildlife Ecologist, will tell us about **“The Okefenokee Wildfires: Perspective from a Wildland Fire Lighter.”** DNR’s Type 6 engine, “Ember” (Shan’s beloved fire engine), was called up for duty on the big wildfires this past spring. Staff from the Nongame Conservation Section and Parks helped contain the wildfire. Shan will describe her experiences on the fire, from the Incident Command System to the strategy of attack to the ecological effects of the fire.

Those of you who have heard Shan talk before can vouch for her incendiary performance!

Upcoming February Program

Doug Carlson will talk about “The Legacy of Roger Tory Peterson” at our February meeting.

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 will be a short way down the road on your right.

Raptors, Live and Up Close!

summarized by Maggie Nettles

Kathryn Dudeck, Wildlife Director at Chattahoochee Nature Center, talked about “Raptors of Georgia: A Brief Introduction to These Amazing Birds” at our November meeting. She provided a wealth of details about our raptors, along with lots of personal experiences.

A high point of the evening came toward the end when she brought out a Barred Owl and a Broad-winged Hawk. The two birds arrived at the nature center too injured to be totally rehabilitated for release, so they became educators.

You can learn more about the nature center at <http://www.chattnaturecenter.com/>

If you could not attend the talk but would like the handouts on hawks, you can pick up a copy at the next meeting.



Great Backyard Bird Count

Millions of novice and accomplished bird watchers can make their fascination with nature add up for science and for the future during the 11th annual Great Backyard Bird Count, led by Audubon and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. During “Presidents’ Day” weekend, February 15-18, 2008, anyone can count birds from wherever they are and enter their tallies online at www.birdcount.org.

These reports create an exciting real-time picture of where the birds are across the continent and contribute valuable information for science and conservation.

The Year of the Nuthatches

from "Birding Notes: Reflections on birds and other wildlife on the edge of a southern woodland" by Sigrid Sanders at <http://www.sigridsanders.com/birding/index.html>

Wednesday, November 28, 2007

White-breasted Nuthatch

Wow! This afternoon about 4:30, I stepped out my front door, and for the first time ever, here around our house, saw a White-breasted Nuthatch. It was working its way along a large branch of a pecan tree, only a few feet away from me. As it moved, it repeatedly made a soft, low, nasal call.

Although I'm still very much enjoying watching the Red-breasted Nuthatches that have become regulars around our yard and feeders this fall, and always love the lively personalities of our year-round Brown-headed Nuthatches, this White-breasted Nuthatch is by far the most striking of the three in appearance. It looked regal – noticeably larger than the others, with a somewhat more upright and graceful posture, not so hunched down, and clean, crisp coloring – a pure, almost gleaming white breast contrasted sharply with glossy black cap and half-collar, and slate-gray back and wings. Its black eyes looked bright and keen against a white face, and its long dark bill turned up just slightly on the end.

One reason I could see it so well is that almost all of the leaves have fallen now from the pecan trees, and most from the oaks, leaving many bare branches open to view. I stood for several minutes watching as it worked its way up the branch, pausing to examine spots, to peck at the bark, and sometimes to turn head-downward for a minute or two. When it neared the end of the branch, it flew to another pecan tree nearby, and began the same pattern.

I think it may have been around for a while. Several days ago, I heard a nuthatch calling, and the sound was lower and more guttural than the Red-breasted Nuthatch's usual ank-ank. I wasn't sure then, but now I think what I heard may have been a White-breasted Nuthatch, and now I'll be listening more carefully for both and hoping to see this one again.

It seems like this fall might be remembered as the Year of the Nuthatches.



Photographer: Charles H. Warren at <http://images.nbii.gov/>

South Carolina Center for Birds of Prey

by Dr. Carole Ludwig

The raucous squealing from the adjoining exam told me that a volunteer staffer had a Red-shouldered Hawk in her arms. My weeks at the Center as a clinician taught me that the raptors had definite personalities, and strong opinions about being handled for treatment. The Barred and Great-horned Owls clacked their bills and seized every opportunity to get you with their talons or beak; the Red-tailed Hawks raised their head feathers, sat on their tails with talons extended and dared you to approach; the tiny Eastern Screech Owls disappeared into a corner of their cage. Strangely, once the huge Bald Eagles were caught, they lay quietly to be treated. We always wore goggles, however, because occasionally they would strike at the handler's face.

Funded primarily by private donations, the Center is the brain-child of Jim Elliot, who started a rescue operation over 15 years ago, literally in his back yard. The Center is an amazing place, and serves to both rescue and rehab birds for release and also educates using its resident bird population, some not native, in flying demonstrations. Its new, well-equipped veterinary clinic and attached oiled-bird treatment facility sits on over 100 acres, just north of Mount Pleasant. Scattered on the property are large holding pens and flight enclosures, for some birds have to learn to fly again, and all have to be conditioned before release. There are several flight fields for training the demonstration birds. Much of the work of running the place is done by well-organized staff volunteers, a delightful group with which to work.

What kind of cases did I see? Most were trauma injuries, broken bones and head trauma from collisions with cars, entanglements in fishing lines, wire fences and tennis nets. And then a fair number could be chalked up to human stupidity: gun-shot wounds, poisonings, and 'baby bird rescues'. Some were just malnourished young birds whose hunting techniques were poor.

Unfortunately, the Center is not open for visitors, but visits can be arranged during events that occur several times a year or for special groups.

Nuthatch Notes

by Maggie Nettles

Nuthatches: Brown-headed, Red-breasted, White-breasted.

You can see all three around Athens this winter. Some people, especially those with lots of pine trees in their yards, see Brown-headed Nuthatches routinely. Lately, people have been reporting sightings of both White-breasted Nuthatches and Red-breasted Nuthatch.

Why are they here in such visible numbers this year? Being of a generally pessimistic nature, I assumed the worst—perhaps the wooly adelgid had killed so many hemlocks up north that the nuthatches had to come here this winter? However, according to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, the numbers of both Red-breasted and White-breasted Nuthatches are increasing, so I guess I shouldn't fret. Nuthatches are not generally migratory, states *The*

Sibley Guide to Bird Life & Behavior, but have occasional years of “irruption” when poor food production forces them further south.

Our own resident Brown-headed Nuthatch, it turns out, is the one I should worry about. National Audubon has added it to its Watch List. For the full entry, see <http://www.audubon2.org/watchlist/>, but below are excerpts.

A species almost exclusively associated with stands of mature pines, the Brown-headed Nuthatch lives year-round in the southeastern United States. Loss of habitat due to logging, forest fragmentation, and fire suppression threaten the species. . . . Numbers are declining throughout its range. Breeding Bird Surveys in southeastern North America from 1966 through 2001, show a statistically significant annual population decline of 2.2 percent. . . . This non-migratory species generally does not disperse far from its breeding range.

Phinizy Swamp Field Trip

By Ed Maioriello

Oconee Rivers Audubon Society had its December field trip to Phinizy Swamp and the Merry Brothers Brickyard Ponds in Augusta, Richmond County, on Saturday, December 8, with 16 birders (including 5 Atlanta visitors). A beautiful warm morning with calm winds and fair skies, temperatures started out at 55 F and reached 76 F by the end of the day. We reported 75 species at Phinizy Swamp, but as you'll see the individual bird counts were more significant than the species counts.

We started on the Cattail Trail and the flood plain deck and immediately had a small raft of eight Mallards in the creek just downstream from the boardwalk. From here we were treated to flocks and flocks of blackbirds coming in and landing on the grasses out in the water, a mix of Rusty Blackbirds and Red-winged Blackbirds with a few Common Grackles and Brown-headed Cowbirds mixed in. We had a conservative count of 400 Rusty Blackbirds here with a comparable number of Red-winged Blackbirds, but what was notable about the Red-winged was that they were all either female or juvenile. There were virtually no adult male Red-winged Blackbirds in with the mix. Then we noticed that the bald cypress trees far across the wetland appeared to be completely leafed out. Closer examination revealed that they were covered with Red-winged Blackbirds. A conservative estimate of these birds combined with some flocks of exclusively adult males we encountered over the cells left us with a count of 4000 Red-winged Blackbirds!

We crossed the campus area toward the Rain Garden deck and noticed seven White Ibises, mostly immature, perched on the distribution canal fence. It's also worth noting that Great Egrets and Great Blue Herons were visible at almost every angle one looked.

From there we proceeded through the sparrow field back toward the woodline. This path yielded myriad White-throated, Swamp, and Song Sparrows as well as 5 Sedge Wrens, a single White-crowned Sparrow and 2 Loggerhead Shrikes. There was also a juvenile Northern Harrier working the field back by the tree line.

We came out of the sparrow field near cell 12 and were delighted to find ourselves looking at about 200 Blue-winged and 90 Green-winged Teal. There were also a number of Northern Shovelers mixed in with the Teal in several cells which totaled 30 for the day at Phinizy Swamp. Naturally we had a number of Pied-billed Grebes popping up here and there in virtually all the cells as well as a few American Coot. Cell 12 also offered a number of looks at Hooded Merganser which numbered 12 for the day.

More Teal of both types were in cells 6 and 7 along with a few more American Coot. As we walked down the distribution canal, we were pleased to have an American Pipit precede us down the canal for quite a way giving most good looks at him. A nice highlight for this section was good looks at quite a few Marsh Wrens. As we passed cells 10 and 11, we got more of the same Teals and Shovelers, but also had a number of Ring-necked Duck and Gadwall. These cells also offered the most American Coots for the Phinizy, which totaled 75.

As we turned down the path along cell 2 heading for the windshear tower, we had quite a few nice finds. There were several Wilson's Snipe working the pond as well as 2 flocks of peeps—one group of 20 Least Sandpipers and one group of 5 Western Sandpipers. In addition we had a number of Savannah Sparrows preceding us down the path and an Eastern Meadow Lark in the path as well. Our sole Ruddy Duck for the day surfaced in cell 2 as well. Moorhens and Sora had been calling from all the cells we passed, and we had gotten good looks at a number of Common Moorhens, but so far the Sora had escaped us. Happily at the far end of cell 3 we were able to get a couple of scopes on it so most got a good look.

After a brief rest we headed down Doug Bernard Parkway to the Merry Brothers Brickyard Ponds (technically it's Boral Bricks, but most documentation still uses the old name). On the way in before the fish shack we got a number of Hooded Mergansers, Pied-billed Grebes, and Gadwall.

We had large numbers of Anhinga, Cormorants and Great Egrets coming down the road from the fish shack, but the real excitement happened after we made the left onto the haul road. Almost immediately, ORAS birder Alison Huff got her scope on something exciting. A pair of dark phase lesser Snow Geese were in the shallows beside the large near island on that end of the pond on the left. The geese were hanging out near a few Gadwall and were very cooperative about hanging out long enough so that all the scopes could be setup and everyone got a look. From here a large number of American Coots were visible—more than enough to make up for the relatively small number we had at Phinizy, and we had a total of over 1,200 for the day at Merry Brothers! In addition to the geese and the coots there were American Wigeon, Northern Shovelers, and a few Canada Geese here. We totaled 40 Wigeon, 30 Shovelers, and 30 Canada Geese at Merry Brothers.

There were also water fowl in the lake to the right of the haul road though the light was poor due to lots of glare. Nonetheless we did get at least 3 more Hooded Mergansers and a huge number of Ring-necked Ducks. This pond had

the majority of the 300 Ring-necked Ducks we tallied for the day at Merry Brothers.

The next excitement came farther down the road in a raft of Lesser Scaup at the far end of the lake. ORAS birder Vanessa Lane indicated that she thought one of those Scaup was a Greater Scaup, which another ORAS birder, Joel McNeal, confirmed. Further observation of that raft revealed a Canvasback among the Scaup.

Then we observed first one then a second adult Bald Eagle cross the lake and perch in tall hardwoods on the other side—a dramatic climax to a fantastic day of birding, but did not bring it to a close. In this same lake we had a large raft of Double-crested Cormorants swimming past us. They brought our count for Cormorants at Merry Brothers to over 900. In the pond on the right hand side of the road we had more American Coots, a flock of 15 Least Sandpipers, 32 American Pipits, and 3 Wilson's Snipe filling out the 37 species we rang up at the brickyard ponds.

Finally, 3:30 in the afternoon found us all pretty much "birded out." We packed up the scopes and headed back to Athens, exhausted and hungry, but delighted to have taken part in such great birding on such a beautiful day. In the car on the way back, we calculated that we had tallied 82 species total for the day at Phinizy Swamp and Merry Brothers Brickyard Ponds.

Oconee Audubon Society
P.O. Box 81082
Athens, Georgia 30608-1082

Oconee Rivers Audubon Society

| | | |
|-----------------------|---------------|----------|
| President | Edwige Damron | 613-9875 |
| Vice-President | Mary Case | 548-3848 |
| Treasurer | Jim McMinn | |
| Secretary | Amy Barbe | |

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maggie_nettles@charter.net or mail to PO Box 81082
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