



# The Yellowthroat

*Voice of the  
Oconee Rivers Audubon Society*

April 2009

Vol. 20 No. 4

## Next Meeting Thursday, April 2, 7:00 p.m. Sandy Creek Nature Center

**Charlie Muise**, Georgia Important Bird Areas (IBA) Coordinator, will discuss “**Sparrow Identification**” at the April meeting. Sparrows are often overlooked or even ignored by birders who think sparrows are too difficult to identify. But sparrows are no more challenging than several other groups of birds. The subtle beauty and interesting lifestyles exhibited by sparrows can make them very appealing to watch.

Muise will attempt to “demystify” the process of identifying the various sparrow species found in Georgia. Using photos taken of birds both in the field and in the hand during banding operations, he will discuss the most important clues to look for when one sees a sparrow. He will also talk about some common identification pitfalls to avoid—including some which are shown in several popular field guides.

Following the main program will be a brief update on the status of Georgia’s Important Bird Areas program, with a question/answer session.

**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.

## Spring 2009 Bird Walks & Field Trips

### Bird Walks:

Have you heard the birds starting to sing? Time to get outdoors and join the spring bird walks, which ORAS sponsors jointly with Sandy Creek Nature Center. Whether you are an experienced birder or a beginner, join us as we witness the miracle of the northward migration. Come to the monthly meeting or email Jonathan Gray at [fieldtrip@oconeeriversaudubon.org](mailto:fieldtrip@oconeeriversaudubon.org) for information about specific bird walks and field trips.

- March 28 8:00 a.m., **Sandy Creek Park**  
last lot on Campsite Drive across dam
- April 4 8:00 a.m., **Whitehall Forest**  
South Milledge Avenue & Whitehall Road
- April 11 8:00 a.m., **Sandy Creek Nature Center**  
SCNC Allen House
- April 18 8:00 a.m., **State Botanical Garden**  
upper parking lot (Day Chapel)
- May 2 8:00 a.m., **Sandy Creek Nature Center**  
(Cook’s Trail Cleanup) SCNC Allen House

### Out-of-Town Field Trips:

- April 25 **Charlie Elliott Wildlife Center**  
6:00 a.m. Meet at Shops of South Athens Lot at Milledge Avenue near Bypass
- May 9 **Kennesaw Mountain**  
6:00 a.m. Meet at Shops of South Athens Lot at Milledge Avenue near Bypass
- May 16 **Ivy Log Gap Road / Sosebee Cove**  
6:00 a.m. Meet at Homewood Shopping Center Prince Avenue/Jefferson Road and the Bypass

## Youth Birding Competition

from <http://www.georgiawildlife.org/enewsletters.aspx>

The 2009 Youth Birding Competition blends fun, challenges, and conservation on a statewide scope. The fourth annual competition is set for April 25-26, with a banquet and awards ceremony scheduled the evening of April 26 at Charlie Elliott Wildlife Center. Registration of teams from kindergarteners to high school seniors is in full swing, with the deadline being March 31. For details, see <http://www.georgiawildlife.com>

## Wekiva Bird Watching (Part One)

by Tim Homan

Page and I took a bird-watching canoe trip on Florida's Wekiva River during Christmas vacation last December. The trick was to find a spring-fed river, one immune to Florida's ongoing drought, far enough south for warm days and far enough north for cool nights to muzzle the mosquitoes. The Wekiva worked out well; we had plenty of water, warm days, and never had to use our headnets.

The public land surrounding the river, mostly to the north, is not wilderness, but it is wild enough for bear, bobcat, and limpkin—the bird voice of those disembodied, Tarzan-movie wails, foreshadowing the jungle's black-magic mystery and whip-snap quick danger. The Wekiva was also wild enough to join an exclusive club: the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. But best of all, the Wekiva's wetlands halted the northwestern spread and splay of Orlando dead in its asphalt tracks.

We had decided to awaken early on our last day, postponing a proper breakfast of bloatmeal, so that we could be on the water well before the first slanting rays of sunrise. We wanted to have the Wekiva and its wildlife all to ourselves before breaking camp and heading upstream to our shuttle. So we set our internal alarms to full bladder and wriggled out of our bags while the forest floor behind our tent, studded with stalagmite cypress knees, was still raven black. With headlights strapped around our foreheads, we gathered gear and boiled river water for coffee and hot chocolate to be carried in the canoe. When night thinned to dark grey dawn, we launched our Prospector into the lightly misted river. Festoons of Spanish moss, one of the botanical signatures of the deep South, draped overhead as we moved from the backwater past an island into the current.

We stroked slowly and silently downstream, eyes peering through the early dawn. A brace of wood ducks rocketed from the nearby aquatic vegetation, the female's *I'm-outta-here* squeals confirming our soft-spoken "woodies." A small flock of ibis followed their curved bills downriver, flapping toward their morning's noodling. The eye bumps of a small gator slowly sunk below the surface at a backward angle. We floated below two anhingas—the first a buffy-necked female, the other a velvety, black-necked male—perched above the same side of the river a hundred yards apart.

We held motionless as an otter dove and surfaced, porpoising its way effortlessly upstream against an island on river right. The otter swam like it was made of a single supple muscle, a wild and flowing energy, quick and capable in the water. Great blue heron, great egret, and little blue heron—both the yearling white ones and the mature blue ones—were staking claims to fishing spots in the slow, heavily vegetated waters

behind the islands. Still well before sunrise, we inadvertently snuck right past a green heron standing on the tip of a mid-stream branch poking five feet above the surface from its underwater windthrow. Its startled eyes betrayed momentary fear and confusion as the current slowly carried our canoe even with the snag. Instinct's quick wisdom seized command; the heron obeyed. It collapsed its neck like an accordion and remained motionless, trusting its life to concealment and the murky light of dawn. Willing itself physically and psychologically inconspicuous, the wader's eyes were turned away from us and its bill was hunched into its shoulder blades by the time our stern passed its perch.

Near our turn-around point, we spotted a small dark duck floating down the middle of the Wekiva ahead of us. The duck, moving faster than a passive float, gained on us every time we stopped to twist its image into focus. But we couldn't identify the duck forty yards ahead in the grey light. So we did what birders do: we matched the bird's general physical characteristics and behavior to the patterns of our experience. And came up with our best guess—a female hooded merganser. In our winter-canoeing experience, female hooded mergansers were the only small, all dark river ducks to regularly float right down the stream, sculling ahead rather than taking flight.

We closed the gap as the would-be merganser turned sideways to us while rounding a bend. We quickly made a positive ID. It wasn't a merganser at all; it was a grebe, a pied-billed grebe, its bill unpied in winter.



On the way back a great blue tensed, turned away from the bank, then lifted off in slow-winging flight. Once airborne and out of reach of retribution, the heron screeched several choice cursewords—brought up

guttural and grating from deep in its long throat—to let us know just what it thought about having its early morning hunt interrupted. Great blues possess the uncanny ability to retch up curse words, to produce those harsh Paleozoic expletives, because they are really only half bird. That's right. They are actually combo creatures: half bird and half spear-headed snake disguised with short feathers.

Closer to camp, Page said "deer" as I followed the point of her paddle to lily pads crowned with the rack of an eight-point buck standing deep in the Wekiva. Downstream, a great egret flew low over the now reflective river, its water and light wings flapping in rhythmic unison with the feathered ones. Each downstroke pulled the ghost wings up in reverse marionette. Each downstroke conjured a somewhat flattened, eye-shaped loop, the two perfect egrets

aligned north and south, the white wing tips touching for an instant east and west. Each wingbeat created everyday water magic, one of the earth's many neglected graces. Birders know that water has more than three forms; they know water can change into egrets flying white across a nether world of forested sky.

We passed the green heron again, this time further away, as the sun breached Florida's flat horizon. This time the bird's instinct made a radically different decision, a defensive stratagem to fake fight and take flight. This time the kinetic energy in the bird's body could no longer hold tight. At the last second, its neck jack-in-the-boxed upward with spring-loaded speed, seemingly beyond physiological limits, as its chestnut neck feathers ruffed out for maximum intimidation and surprise. After a one count, the little heron beat away into the shadowed undergrowth. Pale spears of sunlight lanced into the tops of trees as we neared the island marking our turn toward breakfast.

*(to be continued next month)*

## Going Green for the Birds!

ORAS now has eight dollar shopping bags for sale at Nature's Outpost, now located at 1021 Parkway Blvd., which is in front of Kohl's. Each bag is made of five recycled two-liter bottles. Help the environment by carrying a bag made from trashed soda bottles that would otherwise end up in a landfill.



## International Migratory Bird Day

The International Migratory Bird Day (IMBD) Theme for 2009 is "Celebrating Birds in Culture: Connecting Birds, Habitats, and People." IMBD is officially celebrated on the second Saturday in May in the U.S. and Canada. For details, see <http://www.birdday.org/>

### Give the Gift of Audubon!

For an introductory National Audubon Society membership (which includes *Audubon* magazine, local membership, and a subscription to *The Yellowthroat*), mail this form with a \$20.00 check payable to **NAS** to  
Oconee Rivers Audubon Society  
PO Box 81082  
Athens, GA 30608

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Street \_\_\_\_\_  
City, State, Zip \_\_\_\_\_

## Birds and Climate Change

from <http://www.audubon.org/bird/bacc/index.html>

Nearly 60% of the 305 species found in North America in winter are on the move, shifting their ranges northward by an average of 35 miles. Audubon scientists analyzed 40 years of citizen-science Christmas Bird Count data—and their findings provide new and powerful evidence that global warming is having a serious impact on natural systems. Northward movement was detected among species of every type, including more than 70 percent of highly adaptable forest and feeder birds.

Only grassland species were an exception—with only 38 percent mirroring the northward trend. But far from being good news for species like Eastern Meadowlark and Henslow's Sparrow, this reflects the grim reality of severely-depleted grassland habitat and suggests that these species now face a double threat from the combined stresses of habitat loss and climate adaptation.

It is the complete picture of widespread movement and the failure of some species to move at all that illustrate the impacts of climate change on birds. They are sending us a powerful signal that we need to

- 1) take policy action to curb climate change and its impacts, and
- 2) help wildlife and ecosystems adapt to unavoidable habitat changes, even as we work to curb climate change itself.

## Another Inconvenient Truth

At the March ORAS meeting, environmental activist JC Corcoran discussed "Another Inconvenient Truth: Livestock Production is a Leading Cause of Global Warming," explaining the global climate impacts of a meat-based diet. One source he mentioned, the U.N. report "Livestock's Long Shadow," provides a somber, but difficult to absorb, commentary on how diet choices affect one's carbon footprint. *Scientific American's* February 2009 "How Meat Contributes to Global Warming" summarizes "Livestock's Long Shadow" thus:

Our diets and, specifically, the meat in them cause more greenhouse gases—carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>), methane, nitrous oxide, and the like—to spew into the atmosphere than either transportation or industry.

Current production levels of meat contribute between 14 and 22 percent of the 36 billion tons of "CO<sub>2</sub>-equivalent" greenhouse gases the world produces every year. It turns out that producing half a pound of hamburger for someone's lunch—a patty of meat the size of two decks of cards—releases as much greenhouse gas into the atmosphere as driving a 3,000-pound car nearly 10 miles.

(<http://www.sciamedigital.com> and <http://www.fao.org/docrep/010/a0701e/a0701e00.HTM>)

## Sightings

### Reported at the March meeting:

- **Great Blue Heron**, Sarah Cliett, Danielsville, 2/15/09
- **American Woodcocks, Great Horned Owls**, Eugenia Thompson, SE Clarke Co., 2/10/09
- **American Kestrel**, Eugenia Thompson & Dennis Rice, Hwy 15, Greene Co., 2/21/09
- **Belted Kingfisher** (pair w/ nest hole), Eugenia Thompson & Dennis Rice, Lake Oconee, 2/21/09
- **Hooded Merganser** (pair), Linda Russell, Belmont Road, 2/25/09-3/5/09
- **Purple Martins**, Mark Freeman & Carole Ludwig, Colham Ferry Road, 3/5/09
- **Peregrine Falcons**, Kate Mowbray & Walt Cook, Jocassee Gorge, Horsepasture, SC, January 2009
- **Wood Storks, Yellow-rumped Warblers, Red Knots**, Kate Mowbray, Jekyll Island, 2/22/09
- **Parula** (audible), John Willis, Cedar Creek, 3/5/09
- **Virginia Rail, Snow Goose**, Vanessa Lane, Bear Creek Reservoir

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Submit information to the address above or by e-mail to yellowthroat@oconeeriversaudubon.org. Articles, artwork, notices, and sighting reports welcomed. The deadline for submissions is the first Thursday of each month. All articles and artwork are copyrighted, and all rights are reserved by the authors. Opinions expressed in articles are those of the respective authors and do not necessarily reflect the official views of Oconee Rivers Audubon Society.

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