



The Yellowthroat

*Voice of the
Oconee Rivers Audubon Society*

March 2009

Vol. 20 No. 3

Next Meeting Thursday, March 5, 7:00 p.m. Sandy Creek Nature Center

Environmental activist **JC Corcoran** will discuss “**Another Inconvenient Truth: Livestock Production is a Leading Cause of Global Warming.**” He will explain the global climate impacts of a meat-based diet, and he will show how a few personal diet choices can make a big reduction in the size of one’s carbon footprint.

JC Corcoran is a long-time environmental educator and activist. He has been leading programs on plant-based nutrition and the environmental impact of our food choices for over seven years. Delicious, healthy, vegan refreshments will be served after the program.

For additional information on this subject, see Mike Tidwell’s “The Low-Carbon Diet” in the January/February issue of *Audubon Magazine* at <http://audubonmagazine.org/index.html>

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:



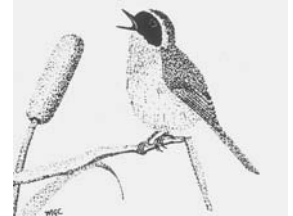
Go left at the end of this short road. The ENSAT building will be a short way down the road on your right.

Apocalypse Meow

Dr. Nico Dauphine will speak on “Apocalypse Meow: Free-ranging Cats and the Destruction of American Wildlife” at 4:00, Thursday, March 5, UGA Forestry Building 1 (the old building that faces the green), room 1-304 (upstairs).

Spring 2009 Bird Walks & Field Trips

Come to the monthly meeting or email Jonathan Gray at fieldtrip@oconeeriversaudubon.org for information about specific bird walks and field trips.



Bird Walks:

- March 21 8:00 a.m., **State Botanical Garden** upper parking lot (Day Chapel)
- 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 Elliot 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

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.



Pine Siskins

from Sigrid Sanders' *Birding Notes*

at <http://www.sigridsanders.com/birding/index.html>

The Strange Uneasiness of Watching Pine Siskins

Wednesday, January 14, 2009

Plain little brown-streaked birds with thin, sharp bills and a touch of yellow in their wings—Pine Siskins have arrived at the feeders behind our house. The way they swarm the feeders in a frenzy of competition and feeding, from a short distance they look more like fluttering moths than birds.

For me, it's a life bird. I've never seen a Pine Siskin before yesterday. But I had studied my field guides and knew what to watch for because there have been many reports of Pine Siskins in this area this year. So I was hoping to see them here, but had almost given up—and was surprised and delighted to have three dozen or more show up and stay around for at least a couple of days.

But I've discovered that I find watching the Pine Siskins somewhat disconcerting. There's something about the constant competition and the frenzied pace that, while interesting, is sort of unsettling. It's not just that there are so many of them, or that they're in a flock—I love watching a large flock of blackbirds, for instance, spread out across a yard and feeding in the grass, flying up together in a hollow *whoosh* of wings. It's the raw competitiveness, and the nervous energy and anxious aggressiveness among the little Siskins that's disturbing. Watching them makes me feel edgy and uneasy.

Pine Siskins—closely related to our much more familiar American Goldfinches—breed in the northern forests of North America, especially in Canada and the far northeast and western U.S., and south through the Appalachians. They are known as an irruptive species, meaning they sometimes move south in large numbers in the winter, while in other years, very few are seen.

I first saw them yesterday morning while I was watching the Pileated Woodpeckers. Three small birds flew down to the birdbath only a few feet away, making rough little chirping noises that weren't familiar to me. When I turned to look, there they were. Heavily streaked with grayish-brown, with tawny brown faces, darker wings, white wing bars, and—the mark that makes identification easy—a small patch of yellow that barely shows in the folded wings.

After the woodpeckers flew, I walked around to the back deck and found Pine Siskins all over both feeders, and more up in the branches of the oaks. I stood only about five feet away from the sock feeder, and a little further from the tube feeder, and they crowded all over both, stuffing seeds into their bills furiously, and constantly competing to get and keep a spot. Different personalities were immediately obvious—while some were very aggressive, clinging to a feeder and repeatedly fending off other birds, others seemed more passive, lurking in the branches or on the deck rail, waiting for a spot to open up—and jumping in as soon as one did. One or two calmer individuals seemed content to feed on thistle seed that had fallen onto the deck.

I watched for a few minutes as one particularly

aggressive Siskin kept all others away from the sock feeder. Whenever another bird approached, it flared its wings and lunged at the newcomer, chasing it away. Meanwhile, most of the Goldfinches seemed to have backed off from the invasion, at least to begin with. Several sat in the branches nearby and mewed. Only one plump, sturdy-looking Goldfinch wasn't intimidated. It clung to the feeder and kept eating, ignoring the little Siskin bully, and pretty soon the Siskin left it alone and the two of them stuffed their bills together, having the feeder to themselves for a while.

The Siskins chirped and flew around me in a whirl of motion, and in some ways I enjoyed watching them, studying their markings and different behaviors. They're often sideways or upside down on the sock feeder, showing a pale, feathered area under the tail that's mostly white with a pretty pattern of brown spots.

Siskin Winter

Tuesday, January 20, 2009

Pine Siskins continue to visit the two feeders on our back deck off and on all day every day. They are aggressive little birds, and only a few Goldfinches succeed in getting to the feeders now and then. Early in the mornings, several Siskins swarm both of the feeders, and there's a whirring of wings and jostling for places as little brown-streaked birds come and go, but they're more tolerant of others at that time, more intent just on eating as much as they can. Later in the day, one or two particularly greedy Pine Siskins sometimes fend off others and try to keep a feeder to themselves, though there are always a few around to challenge them, and frequently several come together again and there's another period of group feeding.

Because it's uncommon for us to have so many Pine Siskins around, I'm trying to take advantage of this chance to watch them—who knows when we'll have another winter invasion like this. So I watch them for several minutes at a time, and look for something about them to draw my interest, but really can't find much, other than their rather mysterious and unpredictable nomadic nature. As individuals, they are not particularly appealing or interesting—though that may be my failure of imagination. They just perch or cling and furiously stuff their sharp, thin beaks with seeds, as fast as they can. Stuff, stuff, stuff—raise head and look around, swallow all those little seeds, then stuff, stuff, stuff again. I get the impression their beaks are pink, though they are not. It's because they are open so much of the time, showing the pink inside of the mouth. In threat or aggressive display, the males seem to open their beaks, too.

They look like what they eat. (Don't we all!) As if their streaks were made by the scattering flight of the tiny brownish gray seeds they send flying all around them. Their heads and faces are patterned in fine, delicately precise fawn-brown streaks. At least one or two of the males show much more yellow in their wings and tail than others, and these appear to be more often the dominant ones that try to keep others away from the feeders.

In all, I think there are about two or three dozen Pine Siskins staying around in the branches of the trees near our back deck and feeding regularly, but there may be more.

Feral Cats Panel Discussion Highlights

Note from Maggie Nettles: Given the controversial nature of this topic, I need to emphasize that the following summary is my understanding of what the individuals said.

The February ORAS meeting featured a panel of four who discussed “The Issues Surrounding Free-ranging Cats, with Emphasis on Possible Solutions for Clarke County”:

- **J Michael Meyers**, Research Wildlife Biologist at the U.S. Dept. of Interior, Certified Wildlife Biologist, and adjunct UGA Graduate Faculty;
- **William Mangham**, DVM, Athens Regional Spay & Neuter Center's veterinarian;
- **Kelly Bettinger**, Certified Wildlife Biologist, Donovan Lab, UGA Plant Biology Department;
- **Steve Holzman**, member of Georgia Ornithological Society's executive committee and list manager for Georgia Birding Online.

Each panelist brought his/her own perspective and expertise to the discussion, but all agreed on the following:

- That the ideal would be zero stray or unwanted cats;
- That the public, especially young people, should be educated about the problems caused by feral cats through “Cats Indoors” or other educational programs;
- That there should be no dumping of cats;
- That cat-owners should be encouraged to keep their pets indoors and have them spayed/neutered;
- That community ordinances should require pet registration and include financial incentives for spaying/neutering.

Kelly Bettinger emphasized the word “responsible” as key to the trap/neuter/release (TNR) program that she participates in on the University of Georgia campus. She advocated fostering and adoption for all the trapped and neutered cats that can live with people. She said that healthy cats that are too wild to be adopted should be neutered, vaccinated, released, and fed in managed, closely monitored colonies. The public, according to surveys she has seen, will not accept killing all feral cats. See <http://www.uga.edu/catsoncampus/index.html>

Steve Holzman supported his rejection of TNR and insistence on zero cats outdoors, even with humane euthanasia as the main tool, by citing the policy statements of numerous groups: Georgia Ornithological Society, Wildlife Society, American Bird Conservancy. Cats, Holzman emphasized, are a non-native species killing native species.

Will Mangham supported TNR as an “imperfect” solution that is better than doing nothing. What, he asked, are the options? We can trap the cats, then what? We can kill them. Or we can neuter them, adopt them out, if they are adoptable, and otherwise release them into managed colonies. The resources, he said, aren't there for trapping all feral cats and then providing all of them with homes.

Joe Meyers said, “I do not believe the public opinion cannot change. We need to educate the public. . . . Leaving cats outdoors is inhumane.” The cat, he said, is a domestic animal bred for thousands of years as a companion to humans. Further, he cited scientific studies demonstrating

that feral cats are “powerful predators” that kill wildlife, especially birds. We need, he said, “to keep a non-native animal out of the environment.”

The panel then fielded a multitude of questions and probing comments on feral cats, and the issue of free-ranging cats in general. Dr. Bob Cooper spoke out on “the issue of humaneness” and urged people to think of the wildlife, “the animals who have no voice.” Those who want to read further on his views should see his “A Scientific View of the Feral Cat Problem” at the *Flagpole's* website <http://flagpole.com>

Jonathan Gray, ORAS Field Trip Chair, closed an evening of intense questioning from the audience by asking, “What can we do? What's the next step?” Most of the audience, and the panel itself, agreed that the next immediate step should involve conveying the gathering's concerns to elected county officials.

Conservation Corner: Being a Good Landlord

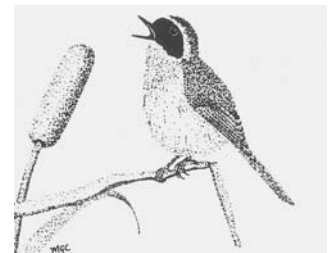
by Verna Johnson,
Conservation Chair

With nesting season right around the corner, we need to take a few minutes

to prepare for our tenants. This is the time to check and clean all nest boxes, and ensure that all baffles or predator guards are tight and secure. Although it's tempting to want to house only a pair of Bluebirds, one way to prevent fighting over a nest box is to put up several boxes in one location. Boxes don't have to be placed 100 feet apart. If you put two boxes close to each other, you may house a pair of Bluebirds, Tufted Titmice, Carolina Chickadees, Brown-Headed Nuthatches, etc., all within the vicinity.

Location, location, location. That's the key to determining what will nest in your box. Bluebirds tend to prefer facing an open area. Chickadees, wrens, and titmice will accept a more woody area. Mount nest boxes on a pole with a predator guard facing south to southeast. Although cavity nesters will use an old woodpecker hole, that doesn't necessarily mean they want to be on a tree. Typically a woodpecker hole is located a lot higher than we are willing to mount a box. A nest box on a tree five to six feet high leaves the adult and baby birds vulnerable to predators. Snakes, raccoons, opossums, and feral cats are all looking for a meal too, and they won't hesitate to make their way up to the box and get what they're looking for. Baffles can easily be placed on a 4x4 post, steel or galvanized pole for protection.

Maintain the property. It is o.k to periodically check the nest box throughout the season. Try to keep trips to a minimum, and if you suspect the fledglings are about to leave the box, around 12-14 days after hatching, avoid any disruption altogether. Keep the area around the box free from tall weeds, debris, or fire ant mounds. Suitable landscaping and maintenance of the property will yield a faithful tenant, and many years of the wonderful feeling of having hosted generations of fledglings.



Bill VanEseltine

Bill VanEseltine, a staunch supporter of ORAS, passed away recently. He was a long-time member of GOS and former chair of the H. Branch Howe scholarship committee. He also participated in the Athens Christmas Bird Counts for many years, long before there was ORAS. We have missed Bill and Marion VanEseltine's faithful attendance at our monthly meetings this year and will certainly miss him at future CBCs.

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

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PO Box 81082
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