



# The Yellowthroat

*Voice of the  
Oconee Rivers Audubon Society*

September 2009

Vol. 20 No. 7

## Thursday, September 3 7:00 p.m. Sandy Creek Nature Center

Dr. Susan Bennett Wilde, of UGA Warnell School of Forest Resources, will talk about “Invasive species, toxic cyanobacteria, and their potential effects on waterfowl and birds of prey.”

Avian Vacuolar Myelinopathy (AVM) is an often fatal disease that primarily affects raptors and waterfowl in the Southeastern United States. The disease was first reported at DeGray Lake, Arkansas, in 1994 when 29 Bald Eagles were found dead or dying. To date, over 100 Bald Eagles and thousands of American coots have died from AVM. AVM bird deaths have since been confirmed in 17 different reservoirs in 5 Southeastern states, affecting Canadian Geese, Ring-neck Ducks, Mallards, Buffleheads, Great-horned Owls, and Killdeer.

Field surveys and feeding studies implicate invasive aquatic plants and associated epiphytic cyanobacteria species as links in this emerging disease among herbivorous waterfowl and their avian

predators. The cyanobacterium grows densely on three plant species nonnative and invasive in North America—hydrilla, Brazilian elodea, and Eurasian watermilfoil.

The site of the most recent AVM eagle deaths is J. Strom Thurmond, GA/SC. Dr. Wilde’s group has sampled Thurmond since 2001 during the active AVM disease season each fall and winter. Hydrilla coverage is more extensive than ever, over 4000 acres and expanding further upstream in the Savannah River coves each year. Stigonematales (AVM suspect toxic algae) coverage varies from 20-100%, and symptomatic waterfowl have been noted each year from October through February. The only remaining active eagle nests are located upstream of the hydrilla infestation and only 2 out of 14 territories were still productive this year.

In addition to having the most recently documented AVM eagle deaths, Georgia is the state with the most new sites documented with AVM bird deaths. Additional sites in Georgia affected by this disease include Lake Juliette, Lake Varner, Horton Lake, Emerald Lake, and Smith Reservoir.

Dr. Wilde hopes to elevate concerns about spreading the hydrilla to new sites, plan strategies to eliminate hydrilla in existing sites, and encourage observation of waterfowl and birds of prey to determine the prevalence of the disease in Georgia.

**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.

## Going Green for the Birds!

ORAS is running a special sale on shopping bags **\$5.00 each**. You can buy them at the monthly meetings.



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.

## Fall Bird Walks & Field Trip

Oconee Rivers Audubon Society and the Sandy Creek Nature Center co-sponsor these bird walks. We hope that both beginning and experienced birders will join us. The pace is generally slow, but participants should dress for occasionally muddy paths.

Here is the tentative birdwalk schedule. Confirm the finalized schedule by attending the September meeting, reading about chapter activities at <http://www.oconeeriversaudubon.org/>, or emailing Jonathan Gray at [fieldtrip@oconeeriversaudubon.org](mailto:fieldtrip@oconeeriversaudubon.org)

- September 5: 8:00 a.m. **State Botanical Garden** upper parking lot (Day Chapel)
- September 12: 8:00 a.m. **Sandy Creek Nature Center** Allen House
- September 26: 8:00 a.m. **State Botanical Garden** upper parking lot (Day Chapel)
- October 3: 8:00 a.m. **Whitehall Forest** South Milledge Ave & Whitehall Rd
- October 10: 8:00 a.m. **Sandy Creek Park** last lot on Campsite Dr. across dam

### Fall Field Trip

September 19: 6:00 a.m. **Kennesaw Mountain**  
Meet at Shops of South Athens Lot, South Milledge Avenue and the Bypass

### Field Trip to find the Yellow Rail

by Alberta M. Smith

Last December, Paul and I joined a group from Aitkin County, Minnesota, for their Christmas Bird Count. There we met Kim Risen, who leads world birding expeditions. We also learned that vast sedge marshes surround the town of McGregor, Minnesota, and that they are home for the yellow rail. Kim said that if we came back in June, he would lead us into the marsh to find a yellow rail, so we decided to take him up on his offer.

We met Kim the evening of June 22 and first drove to the Rice Lake National Wildlife Refuge to find Le Conte's sparrow, very common in this area, and Nelson's sharp-tailed sparrow. We learned Nelson's usually sings at dawn and dusk and all night long. Our hunt for the yellow rail began near dusk, about 10 p.m.

We parked at the edge of the expansive sedge marshes just outside McGregor. It was a promising evening as the pebble-clapping song of the yellow rail could be heard coming from each place we stopped. We scouted several areas and then returned to one area where the rails seemed closest to the road.

The first challenge in trying to see the rail was to cross the roadside drainage ditches. Kim said the water could be three feet deep, well over the tops of our boots. Just as we were preparing to take the plunge, Kim heard rails calling from the western side of Highway 65 and went to check. This was promising because not only were there singing rails, but there was no drainage ditch

to cross.

We soon learned what it was like to walk across these shallow-basin, wet sedge marshes. If you have trampled on a quaking bog of sphagnum moss, the feeling is pretty much the same. Standing or slowly moving water is present most of the year, and the thickly matted sedges provided a closed canopy about three or four feet high.

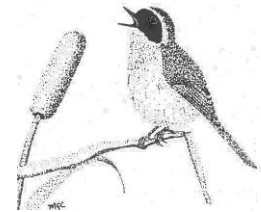
We slogged through the meadow by flashlight until we got close to a singing rail. Kim used a recording to lure the rail into view. Several times we felt the rail was so close that we could reach out and touch him, but the density of the sedges prevented a sighting. We pursued the rails farther into the marsh. As it neared 11 p.m., fog began to creep in over the marsh, making it feel more eerie, yet beautiful.

Finally, Kim was able to flush one yellow rail which flew only a short distance before disappearing into the sedges. We had a good view and were satisfied that we had seen the yellow rail. Kim, however, persisted and knew we could get a great view. Using his recorded calls, he eventually was able to get one rail to emerge into an opening where we had trampled down the vegetation. We saw how the bird slithered through the marsh vegetation close to the ground into the opening. I realized that it was much more difficult to get a viewing of this bird as compared to a king or clapper rail, due to its small size and the thickness of vegetation where it lives. The yellow rail actually paraded around the recorder and walked within inches of us.

Kim said we were fortunate because sometimes it is not until the wee hours of the morning that he can find a bird. Once a yellow rail actually flew out of the sedges and landed on his arm in response to the recordings. Kim is a co-author of an award winning booklet called "Aitkin County Naturally," a birding and nature trail guide. In it he lists professional guides for birding tours in that area, but it is also a very in-depth guide for self-exploration of the county.

As we left the marsh about 11:30, the fog had closed in and we were guided by lights on radio towers back to our vehicles. The Le Conte's sparrows and yellow rails were still singing and peace had returned to this unique ecosystem.

### Appreciation for ORAS Volunteer Jim McMinn



During his years as treasurer for ORAS, Jim McMinn did a lot of work that the ORAS Board would like to recognize, especially since what he accomplished was often not visible to the general membership.

Thank you, Jim, for all you have done!

## Good news for Cerulean Warblers in Georgia

by Charlie Muise, Georgia's Important Bird Area Coordinator

In early May I assisted Jim Wentworth of the US Forest Service and Nathan Klaus of Georgia Department of Natural Resources, in conducting surveys of their habitat management areas along Ivylog Gap Road and Cooper's Creek within the Chattahoochee National Forest.

Beginning in 2001, the Georgia IBA program has assisted in DNR and USFS efforts to manage for the increasingly rare Cerulean Warbler (CERW). Work began with intensive surveying followed by small patch cuts in these two areas to try to mimic the structure of old-growth forest interspersed with large treefall gaps along these two areas. The purpose is to find whether birds would occupy new habitat, and if so, how long it would take them to find it. While CERW is the target species, it is hoped that other songbirds requiring a well-developed canopy structure will benefit as well.

The sites were chosen for their elevation, aspect, and forest type, which are similar to those occupied by CERW in other parts of Georgia.

Ivylog Gap in particular was chosen because CERW have been observed there since at least the 1920s. With the help of the IBA program and Georgia birders, these sites were surveyed for three years prior to treatment. Sites already hosting CERW were not treated. Twenty to thirty percent of the trees were removed from each ten-acre treatment site by a commercial logger, and proceeds from the timber sale covered all project costs. Because CERW tend to occupy the largest trees in an area, these were carefully marked and left standing.

Four years later, CERW occupy at least half of the cuts along Ivy Log! CERW are notoriously difficult to detect because they sing infrequently and only very early in the season, but if casual observations are added to official counts, it is likely that CERW occupy 8 of the 10 cuts along Ivy Log this year.

We have also documented an increase in populations of Chestnut-sided Warblers, Worm Eating Warblers, Hooded Warblers, American Redstarts and Kentucky Warblers. So far, CERW have not occupied any of the control (untreated) sites or any part of the monitored Duncan Ridge/Coopers Creek area.

Volunteers, organized in part by the IBA program, have played a critical role documenting locations of CERW from the project's inception. Preliminary data collected by volunteers resulted in much earlier surveys than previously believed necessary by several experts, which in turn resulted in the highest CERW counts. Specifically, it was these citizen scientists who learned that the males are holding territory and singing when spring foliage is still emerging. By the time traditional surveys are conducted, many of the males have found mates and stopped singing. This information would not

have come to light without our volunteers, including Dot Freeman, Ken Blankenship, Pierre Howard, Darlene Moore, Rachel Cass, Georgann Schmalz, and Betty Belanger.

The next step will be to determine if CERW begin occupying the other cuts along Duncan Ridge in the Cooper's Creek WMA. To our knowledge there weren't any CERW in these areas when the cuts were made. But the news from Ivylog is very encouraging, and these cuts may yet prove to be a useful tool for the conservation of our fastest declining warbler!

This work was supported in part by donations to Georgia's Nongame Conservation Section (Buy a tag!) and the Important Bird Area program (Make a donation!).

**Editor's note:** If you are interested in volunteering and/or making a donation, you can contact Charlie Muise at 678-967-9924 or [cmmbirds@yahoo.com](mailto:cmmbirds@yahoo.com). Check out the information about Georgia's IBAs at <http://www.atlantaaudubon.org/iba/index.htm>


You can obtain additional information about Cerulean Warbler research on Cornell's Cerulean Warbler Atlas Project webpages at <http://www.birds.cornell.edu/cewap/index.html>

## October Social & Meeting at 6:00

Oconee Rivers Audubon Society will hold its annual Social and Recipe Swap at 6:00 p.m. on October 1. Come one, come all! Share your recipes and dishes at our annual potluck of favorite appetizers and join us for an evening of socializing in the outdoors! Come snack early at 6:00 and then enjoy a presentation afterwards at our monthly meeting.

## Upcoming Birding Festival

Georgia's 2009 Colonial Coast Birding & Nature Festival takes place on Jekyll Island, October 8 - 12. Dr. Don Kroodsma, author of *The Singing Life of Birds*, is the keynote speaker. For additional details, see <http://www.coastalgeorgiabirding.org/>

<b>Give the Gift of Audubon!</b>		<b>Oconee Rivers Audubon Society</b>
For an introductory National Audubon Society membership (which includes <i>Audubon</i> magazine, local membership, and a subscription to <i>The Yellowthroat</i> ), mail this form with a \$20.00 check payable to <b>NAS</b> to		
Oconee Rivers Audubon Society PO Box 81082 Athens, GA 30608		
Name _____		
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## **A Swift Night Out**

*adapted from information provided by Paul and Georgan Kyle*

As summer draws to a close and the swifts have finished raising their young, these fascinating aerial acrobats begin to congregate in communal roosts prior to their migration in the fall. Some roosts may host hundreds or even thousands of swifts! We encourage you to join your local Audubon chapter in this exhilarating spectacle.

Participants should meet with Carole Ludwig on **Friday, September 11**, on the street behind the Bottleworks to count swifts. The group will observe the Bottleworks roost starting about 30 minutes before dusk and estimate the number of swifts that enter. If enough people participate, the group will split in two so that downtown sites can also be counted.

To participate, contact Carole Ludwig at the September meeting or call her at 706-769-7008.

For additional information and results, please visit: [www.chimneyswifts.org](http://www.chimneyswifts.org)

## **Bird Banding Opportunity**

The Jekyll Island Banding Station will be banding birds October 3 – 18. To volunteer, contact Chris Pitman at 770/339-0916 or [ovenbird@att.net](mailto:ovenbird@att.net)

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Submit information to the address above or by e-mail to [yellowthroat@oconeeriversaudubon.org](mailto: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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