



The Yellowthroat

Voice of the

Oconee Rivers Audubon Society

December 2012

Vol. 23, No. 10

**Next Meeting:
Thursday, December 6, 7:00 p.m.
Sandy Creek Nature Center**

For the 7:00 p.m. presentation:

**Investigations of American Alligator
Habitat Use and Population Abundance
on Jekyll Island**

Greg Skupien will discuss a research project that focuses on the habitat and behavior of American alligators on Jekyll Island and the conflicts that can arise from alligator-human interactions. In an effort to refute common misconceptions of the American alligator and stress their ecological importance, Skupien will discuss the basic biological and behavioral characteristics of these large, native reptiles.

For the past two years, Greg has worked on Jekyll Island as a researcher at the Georgia Sea Turtle Center and is currently pursuing a Master's degree in Conservation Ecology and Sustainable Development in the Odum School of Ecology. His professional interests focus on conservation of perceived nuisance wildlife and translating biological field data into management recommendations and public awareness efforts to reduce human-wildlife conflict.

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.

Christmas Bird Count, December 15

by *Mary Case*

The annual Audubon Christmas Bird Count is Saturday, December 15, 2012. This is a nationwide count of birds during the dates of December 14, 2012 to January 6, 2013.

You do not have to be an experienced birder to help count with one of the 15 groups covering the Athens area count circle. (It's a fun learning experience for beginning birders).

If you would like to join us in the count, please contact Mary Case by email: mecase@uga.edu or Eugenia Thompson by email: erobertthom@bellsouth.net by Thursday, December 6 so we can assign you to a group.

If you can come to the Oconee Rivers Audubon Meeting on Thursday, December 6 at 7:00 p.m. at Sandy Creek Nature Center, you will be able to meet your count leader.

Please note that the beginning and end times are up to each of the group leaders—another good reason to meet with your count leader ahead of time. Also, the Count-down Potluck Dinner is held at Sandy Creek Nature Center at 7:00 p.m. following the day of birding. Join us for this fun event, too!

**Sightings Reported at October and
November Meetings**

Magnolia Warbler, Normaltown, 10/2, Mason Cline
Veery, New Town, Athens, 9/30, Clark Jones
Rose-breasted Grosbeak, SE Clarke County, 10/1, 10/4, Eugenia Thompson
Rose-breasted Grosbeak, East Athens, 10/2, 10/4, Mack Duncan
Little Blue Heron, Green Heron, Lake Chapman, 9/23, Kate Mowbray and Gary Crider
Tennessee Warbler, White-breasted Nuthatch, State Botanical Garden, 9/29, Alison Huff
Red-breasted Nuthatch, Northern Shoveler, Ring-necked Duck, Oct., North High Shoals, Oconee County, Steve Holzman and Rachel Carr
Barred Owl, 10/24 near Tallassee Road, Liz Conroy

October 2012 Clarke County eBird Sightings Summary *by Richard Hall*

October 2012 again smashed recent county records with 143 species reported to eBird, compared with 128 in 2011 and 136 in 2010. This total included the first county eBird records of Willow Flycatcher at the ACC landfill on 3rd (RH, BKOG) and the remarkable co-occurrence of Henslow's (RH) and Nelson's (m. ob.) Sparrows at the South Milledge fields on 20th (with Grasshopper Sparrow found that evening making a 3 *Ammodramus* day!).

The South Milledge fields proved to be a great place to bird this month. A singing Sedge Wren set a new seasonal early date for the species on 3rd (RH), with 1-2 birds present until 27th (a new county late date; MF, BKOG). The only October record of Wilson's Warbler was seen on 4th (JH), and a new early arrival date for Wilson's Snipe was set on 13th (JN).

The third recent record of Common Ground Dove was a great find on 19th (MF). A new late record for Barn Swallow was set the same day (MB, RH). New late dates were also set for Marsh Wren on 22nd and White-eyed Vireo on 26th (both MB). Other locally scarce species including Loggerhead Shrike, Vesper, Grasshopper, Lincoln's and White-crowned Sparrows, were recorded multiple times during the month (m. ob.).

The first half of the month saw some good raptor movements, including a Peregrine at the State Botanical Garden (the Garden) on 2nd (RH, MJ), a remarkable passage of 3 Osprey, 2 Merlin (both county high counts) and a Northern Harrier over Lake Chapman the same day (RH), a new high count of 7 Broad-winged Hawks over JN's backyard on 7th and a new late date for this species at the Garden on 12th (JH).

Waterbirds were on the move at Lake Chapman, with 4 Ruddy Ducks (a new early date), the second recent record of Sora seen from a kayak on 21st (CJ), and a new early fall arrival date for Horned Grebe on 30th (RH). Cook's Trail yielded new county high counts of 59 Brown Thrashers and 33 Red-bellied Woodpeckers on 6th (NF, JH, JM), and the Oxbow Lake hosted new early arrival records for American Coot on 9th and American Black Duck on 28th (both RH).

Notable records from the ACC landfill included a new late date for Dickcissel on 12th (RH), a new early arrival date for American Pipit on 16th, and a couple of flyover Pine Siskins, perhaps heralding another invasion year for the species (RH). The major incursion of Red-breasted Nuthatches into the state was reflected in Athens, with the first individual reported from the Garden on 4th (JD) followed by multiple observations, including 2 together in BKOG's backyard.

Observers: Mirko Basen, John Deitsch, Nathan Farnau, Mark Freeman, Richard Hall, Jim Hanna, Clark Jones, Joel McNeal, James Neves, Bill and Karla O'Grady. m. ob. = multiple observers



Photo of Nelson's Sparrow by Richard Hall

Bird Brains: The Intelligence of Animals

summary of November meeting by Liz Conroy

Thanks to Dr. Betty Jean Craig for presenting the November program, **Bird Brains: How Cosmo, a Parrot, Has Awakened Us to the Intelligence of Animals**. Craig noted that throughout her life, she had always wanted to know what other species thought about the world. She explained how she bought Cosmo as a very young parrot—just six months old—from a local pet store.

At first, Craig would whistle to Cosmo and the young African Grey Parrot would whistle in response. At about twelve months old, Cosmo was learning to talk as Craig spoke to her frequently using simplified English. By eighteen months, Cosmo was speaking well. Also, a vet determined the parrot was female with a DNA test.

Craig described the similarity in brain structures when comparing birds to humans and listed several interesting behaviors exhibited by Cosmo which blur the human/animal distinctions made by scholars in the past:

For example, Cosmo not only talks, but she also shows emotions, engages in deception, and recognizes herself in the mirror. Sometimes, the parrot shows humor with various jokes. When the telephone rang, Cosmo had learned to say, "Telephone for Betty Jean." Then one day, all on her own, Cosmo heard the telephone ring and declared, "Telephone for . . . bird!"

Near the end of her presentation, Craig discussed the "Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness" (July 7, 2012) signed by prominent neuroscientists at an international conference in England. She quoted: ". . . the weight of evidence indicates that humans are not unique in possessing the neurological substrates that generate consciousness. Non-human animals, including all mammals and birds, and many other creatures, including octopuses, also possess these neurological substrates."

President's Message – ORAS Holiday Market at December Meeting

by Richard Hall

Looking for gift ideas for the holiday season? ORAS can certainly help. At our December 6 speaker meeting, we will be hosting our ORAS Holiday Market where we'll be selling ORAS sweatshirts and T-shirts in kids and adult sizes, emblazoned with our wonderful yellowthroat logo designed by competition winner Alison Huff.

Also, consider treating a family member or friend to an Audubon membership, or to a Backyard Wildlife Sanctuary certification. These gifts benefit our local birds and wildlife as well. We will be selling bird seed, too. If you are lucky, your feeder(s) may be graced by a Red-breasted Nuthatch or Pine Siskin, both of which are experiencing invasion years.

Another great reason to support the ORAS Holiday Market is that the proceeds go towards supporting our ORAS small grants program, which funds local restoration, education and research efforts beneficial to birds and other local wildlife.

This fall we awarded three small grants to: schoolteachers Mai Whigham (Oglethorpe Avenue Elementary School) and Susie Criswell (Whit Davis Elementary School) to engage their students with nature by providing bird feeders, seed and binoculars; and to UGA Landscape Architecture student Zach Richardson to fund interpretive signs and native plants along Tanyard Creek on the UGA campus, as part of his innovative restoration project using goat grazing to remove Chinese privet and other invasive plants.

Finally, I encourage you all to take part in our Christmas Bird Count on Saturday, December 15. All ages and abilities are welcome, and it's a great way to improve your birding skills, to contribute to one of the longest-running citizen science projects on the planet, and importantly, to make new birding friends in the Athens area. Hope to see you out there!

Eco-Haiku by Robert Wyatt

No wind stirring—
cold, cold, water mirroring
trees and sky overhead.

From Stygian darkness
kingfishers emerge to fly
and feed in sunlight.

The Backyard Wildlife Sanctuary

by Linda Russell

December is a great month to improve the habitat in your yard. Steps taken now will reap you and native wildlife many rewards in the spring. Start now to look over your landscape and think about what to add and what to remove.

For example, this is an excellent time to remove invasive plant species, especially Chinese Privet (*Ligustrum sinense*).

How? Chopping privet to the ground and painting the stump with 18% Glyphosate (Round Up) within 30 seconds will kill it. Just be sure the temperature is above freezing when you "cut and paint" or it will not be effective.

After removing invasive species, replace them with native shrubs such as American Beautyberry (*Callicarpa americana*), Elderberry (*Sambucus canadensis*), Blueberries, Spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*) or Native Azaleas, which provide nutrition for many types of wildlife.

Also, with the gift giving season approaching, consider gifts of birdbaths, feeders, or seed for friends and relatives. Or, give a book. An excellent one which will inspire and inform readers about the importance of creating a backyard habitat is **Bringing Nature Home** by Douglas W. Tallamy.

Remember, every yard counts toward conserving our native plants and wildlife. Make 2013 the "Year of the Yard" including your own yard. Become a Certified Backyard Wildlife Sanctuary Homeowner soon by providing habitat for birds, wildlife, and native plants in our community. It's an easy and fun way to help the environment and the wildlife which depends upon native plants to thrive.

For more information: www.oconeeriversaudubon.org or email conservation@oconeeriversaudubon.org

Give the Gift of Audubon!

For an introductory National Audubon Society membership



Oconee Rivers
Audubon Society

(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

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City, State, Zip _____

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Invitation to Hike, Bird and Visit Elachee Nature Science Center

by Peter Gordon

Elachee Nature Science Center is an environmental education center and land trust located just south of Gainesville near Exit 17, off of Interstate 985.

The center provides programming for 35,000 students per year and manages the 1,500-acre Chicopee Woods Nature Preserve, a biologically significant green space located at the headwaters of the middle branch of the Oconee River. Designated an Important Bird Area (IBA) by the National Audubon Society, Elachee and the Chicopee Woods are home to more than 150 species of birds. Twelve miles of trails take hikers and birders through a variety of habitats that attract a diversity of avian species. The Nature Center is open Mon. – Fri. from 10:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. The hiking trails are open 8:00 a.m. until dusk each day of the year. Call Elachee: 770-535-1976 or visit: www.elachee.org

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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.

