



# The Yellowthroat

Voice of the

Oconee Rivers Audubon Society

December 2016

Vol. 27, No. 10

## Next Meeting:

**Thursday, December 1, 7:00 p.m.  
Sandy Creek Nature Center in Athens**

For the 7:00 p.m. presentation:

## **Beech Haven: A Hidden Sanctuary in the Heart of Athens**

Nat Kuykendall, Vice Chair of the Oconee Rivers Greenway Commission, will discuss "Beech Haven", the Rowland family's historic rustic retreat along the Middle Oconee River. First purchased by Athens businessman Charles A. Rowland II in 1910, Beech Haven is now surrounded by suburban and commercial development, but remains a secluded natural sanctuary. The site has a long history as an important social and religious gathering place in Athens and, with new public ownership, may once again be a cultural and recreational hub for the community.

In this illustrated presentation, Kuykendall will trace the fascinating history of the place and discuss on-going efforts to protect the site and Beech Haven's exciting potential as part of the Athens-Clarke County Greenway Network.

**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 Education & Visitor Center building is a short way down the road on your right.

## **Athens Area Christmas Bird Count**

by Mary Case

The Athens Area Christmas Bird Count will be on December 17, 2016. This is the 117<sup>th</sup> year that the CBC has taken place since its modest beginnings. The count now covers the 50 states in the U.S. and various countries around the world. Join us for all or part of the day. You don't need to be an expert birder. We have 14 count areas in Athens. The count circle begins at the intersection of South Milledge and South Lumpkin. Contact Mary Case by email: [mecase@uga.edu](mailto:mecase@uga.edu) or Eugenia Thompson by phone: 706.201.5524 or by email: [erobertthom@bellsouth.net](mailto:erobertthom@bellsouth.net) for more info and to sign up.

## **Message from the President** by Brian Cooke

My favorite part of being President of Oconee Rivers Audubon Society is helping to facilitate the ORAS Conservation Grant. We get to hear from scientists, students, educators, and community members about their own plans to help birds in our area and across Georgia. At the end of each round of grants, the impact of Oconee Rivers Audubon Society is very tangible.

This fall, we were happy to receive three applications for the ORAS Conservation Grant. Each of grantees below was awarded \$600 for their projects:

1. Ashley Lohr – A graduate student at the University of Georgia Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources studying wild turkey in the Piedmont.
2. Sandy Creek Nature Center, Inc. – A nonprofit in support of Sandy Creek Nature Center working on the introduction of native plant seeds, including pollinators, to the Managed Forest Project.
3. Natalie Harris – A student at the University of Georgia Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources studying eastern bluebird nesting success.

Stay up-to-date regarding these grant projects and the grantees by reading our *Yellowthroat* newsletter each month or coming to our monthly meetings. Through your donations, you make the ORAS Conservation Grant program possible each year. Please consider supporting future rounds of this grant program through your donations to ORAS.



**Photo of Barn Owl at Athens Landfill by Vince Howard, Clarke County—October 22, 2016**



**Photo of Black Vulture at Athens Landfill by Marilyn Estes, Clarke County—October 22, 2016**



**Photo of Eurasian Eagle Owl at Athens Landfill by Ryan Chitwood, Clarke County—October 22, 2016**

## **Vulture Festival Grows in 2016**

*by Ryan Chitwood*

Athens-Clarke County Recycling, Bear Hollow Zoo, and the Oconee Rivers Audubon Society joined forces again to deliver a fun and educational outreach event celebrating the many ecosystem services that vultures provide within the Athens area community.

The event began with an early morning bird walk led by ORAS's own Ed Maioriello. The walk featured good views of a late Prairie Warbler, White-crowned Sparrow, Red-breasted Nuthatch, and an abundance of Turkey and Black Vultures, of course! Additionally, this unique event gave bird walk attendees the option to travel to the normally restricted red barn to get looks at a sleepy Barn Owl.

Beyond great bird sightings, this year's festival had more attendees than ever with 170 visitors and 30 volunteers. A special thanks to all ORAS members who attended and supported this great event. Many traditions from previous years continued such as: stations with crafts, activities, and information aimed at teaching children (and their parents) about vulture biology and ecology across the globe. The event also included a scavenger hunt where families explored the Landfill's outdoor classroom for more vulture-themed fun. New activities for this year included a photo booth with vulture props, a costume contest, and, perhaps most popular of all, live bird demonstrations hosted by a trained falconer from Winged Ambassadors.

Overall, it's safe to say that this was the most successful Vulture Festival yet, and it would not have been possible without the many who volunteered. We are already considering ways to improve the event. Whether it's via volunteering or attending, you will not want to miss out on next year's festival!

## A Sad Farewell to Laura Conroy

by *Liz Conroy*

Our 25-year-old daughter, Laura Conroy, passed away in the early hours of Sunday, Oct. 30. Just the weekend before, she gave five public performances at Canopy Studio doing an incredibly challenging triples pole piece.

Laura needed rest and healing, but how can anyone put reins on a shooting star? Soaring on the trapeze, the pole, and silks was her passion. She loved encouraging others to do the same. After a full week of teaching, she led the Wild Rumpus parade on the evening of Oct. 29 with fellow aerialists. In their shiny purple wigs, they performed amazing moves on the trapeze by City Hall. It was physically demanding, but she had not brought any water with her. By midnight, Laura was hungry, tired and severely dehydrated.

Upon returning to her rental house on Chase St, she gulped some wine and had a serious argument with her boyfriend, Adam. In a rage, she grabbed a cloth belt, stormed out and tied the belt around her neck and to a tree in the dark backyard. As an expert of knots, her work was perfect and fatal.

The next afternoon, Oct. 30, Detective Hayes met me in downtown Athens to state that Laura Conroy was deceased. I argued it was a mistake; Laura couldn't be dead. She didn't abuse drugs or alcohol and showed no signs of depression. We were planning a road trip to see her dad up in Windsor, Canada. She fully enjoyed life. How could she be gone?

Laura loved all aspects of life, especially birds and other wildlife. She spent the first seven years of her life on Bear Creek before our family had to move due to the reservoir construction. One day, I found little Laura in the basement with her nose pressed against the window that looked out over the creek. I asked what was she doing, and she softly replied, "I'm okay—I am with my friend." Just outside, a Great Blue Heron was standing still and gazing back at her.

She fiercely protected reptiles from being hurt or killed. As a UGA student, she discovered black rat snakes in the basement of her rental house on Boulevard. The landlord wanted to kill them, but she barred his path and insisted that Animal Control be called to take them safely away. She always cherished children and wild and domestic animals throughout her young life.

On the morning of Nov. 6, the day after Laura's memorial service at Canopy Studio, I rose before dawn to remember her at Bear Creek Reservoir near our old home site. As I walked down our old driveway, the early morning sun turned the rising mist into spun gold, and about sixty Canada Geese flew from the eastern shore calling as they passed overhead. I felt Laura's presence. She is in the sunlight, in the sparkling water, and in the call of the wild things. We love her so much and miss her with all of our hearts. I know it is in nature and in connections with others that we will find peace.



**Photo of Laura Conroy (age 25) at Canopy Studio by Mike Conroy, Athens, 2016**



**Photo of Laura Conroy (age 5) learning to use real binoculars for birding on Lake Huron, by Mike Conroy, Michigan, 1996**

## ***Untamed: The Wildest Woman in America***

summary of November meeting by Heather Abernathy

Thanks to Will Harlan for his talk about his book “*Untamed: The Wildest Woman in America and the Fight for Cumberland Island*” on November 3. His book focuses on the life of Carol Ruckdeschel and her conservation efforts on Cumberland Island, a national seashore off the coast of Georgia.

Harlan recalled his own experience as a park service employee on Cumberland and meeting Carol for the first time. He described Carol’s life: her family, her homesteading lifestyle on the island, and the controversy surrounding her environmentalist presence on the island.

Carol and the wealthy families inhabiting the island have not always seen eye to eye, especially when Carol thwarted their efforts to make the marriage place of JFK and Jackie open to public tours. This action was something that Carol believed would fragment and minimize the federally designated wilderness areas. He also listed Carol’s conservation management plans for the island such as controlling the wild horse population to maintain healthy and disease free herds, monitoring sea turtle demography on the beaches, and adding controlled burns to the island.

Harlan then explained the ecology, recovery, and conservation of sea turtles. He described Carol’s conservation efforts for sea turtles and her passion for monitoring these species. As a result, Carol helped start a multi-million dollar federal agency with the primary objective of monitoring sea turtle populations and helped design and implement the use of a sea turtle excluder devices for industrial shrimpers’ nets.

Harlan also discussed the controversies surrounding Carol on the island. Carol created controversy among the island’s wealthy residents with her proposed management plans and eco-conscious perspective for the island’s future as well as with her personal actions. Harlan covered aspects of her love life and how it led to her killing a man on the island. She then felt that she had tainted the island with her actions and planned to leave but changed her mind based on her belief that the island needed her. The island needed a non-partisan environmentalist voice on the island and her love for the island’s beauty and natural resources made her the perfect candidate.

Harlan made it clear that Carol is no hero but a real and raw person who cares desperately for the island’s wellbeing. He wanted her story, her passion, and the story of Cumberland’s natural beauty to be known to the world.

For more information about Carol and her conservation efforts on Cumberland Island, visit her website <http://wildcumberland.org/>.

## ***The Natural World of Winnie-the-Pooh***

reviewed by Liz Conroy

Author Kathryn Aalto’s new book, *The Natural World of Winnie-the-Pooh: A Walk Through the Forest that Inspired the Hundred Acre Wood*, brings forth childhood memories of growing up with stories about Pooh bear and all of his close friends. Many of us who love nature as adults learned early in life about the wonders of the fields, forests and streams through the eyes of these small animals and the young boy named Christopher Robin.

The Hundred Acre Wood is inspired by the very real and enchanting Ashdown Forest—a former royal hunting forest. This area of heathland and woodlands covers about 6,500 acres in southeast England and is near the Cotchford Farm where Pooh’s creator, A.A. Milne raised his family.

Aalto is an American landscape designer now living in Exeter, England. Her descriptions about the trees, plants and paths bring out the magical quality of the forest; there are holes and burrows where small animals, such as Owl, Rabbit and Pooh, might live. The photos are lovely, including one of the real Christopher Robin standing in the hollow of a huge walnut tree with his stuffed toys: Pooh, Piglet and Roo.

Her book inspires readers to return to the writings of Milne and the illustrations of E.H. Shepard. It may also be a fine holiday gift for those who love nature. Timber Press: 2015.

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