



The Yellowthroat

Voice of the

Oconee Rivers Audubon Society

February 2015

Vol. 26, No. 2

Next Meeting: Thursday, February 5, 7:00 p.m. Sandy Creek Nature Center in Athens

For the 7:00 p.m. presentation:

Coastkeeper to Describe Threats to Georgia's Largest River Basin

An ornithologist who's served as the Altamaha Riverkeeper's "Coastkeeper" since last spring will describe her work in one of the largest river basins on the Atlantic seaboard and give a status update on American Oystercatchers in the Altamaha delta.

Jen Hilburn, who's lived and conducted ornithological work on the Georgia coast for 13 years, will discuss issues the Altamaha Riverkeeper handles on the 137-mile-long river and give an update about how oystercatchers are faring in the Altamaha delta and along Georgia's Atlantic coast.

Last March, Hilburn was named Coastkeeper for Altamaha Riverkeeper, a grassroots organization dedicated to protecting, defending and restoring Georgia's biggest river and its tributaries—which include the North and Middle Oconee Rivers in Athens.

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.

Sightings Reported at January Meeting

Northern Pintail, Dyar Pasture, Greene County, John Mark Simmons, 1/03/15

Pacific Loon, Bear Creek Reservoir, Jackson County, Josiah Lavender 12/31/14 and John Mark Simmons 1/01/15

Gambrel's White-crowned Sparrow (possible), Ward Rd., Greene County, Josiah Lavender, 1/07/15

American Wigeon, Braswell Church Rd, Walton County, Jim Hanna 1/02/15

Rufous Hummingbird, 675 Cobb St., Clarke County, Krista Gridley, 11/14 - current

American Woodcock, 122 Old Edwards Rd (my yard), Oglethorpe County, Leila Dasher, 1/04/15 – 1/14/15

Northern Harrier, S. Colham Ferry Rd., Watkinsville, Oconee County, Carole Ludwig, 1/02/15

Peregrine Falcon, downtown Watkinsville, Oconee County, Homer R., 10/27/14

Redhead, Sandy Creek Park, Clarke County, Jim Hanna 1/08/15

8 Tundra Swans, Turkey Pond, Burke County, Richard Hall 1/02/15

The Backyard Wildlife Sanctuary

Become a Certified Backyard Wildlife Sanctuary Homeowner by providing habitat for birds, wildlife, and native plants in our community!

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

Linking Invasive Seaweed and Shorebirds on the Georgia Coast

by Linsey Haram

The salt marshes of the Georgia coast are ecological hubs in the Southeast. These ecosystems are quite dynamic, with their resources and inhabitants changing seasonally. Throughout the year various fish and invertebrate species peak at different times based on their reproductive cycles. In the fall, migratory shorebirds and waterfowl begin to appear in the marshes. By mid-winter, overwintering birds become established, and hundreds of shorebirds can be seen foraging on mudflats at low tide. When the spring reinvigorates the marsh, the migratory birds return to their breeding grounds after fueling up on their abundant prey.

Within the seasonal cycle, there are species that remain prevalent in Georgia salt marshes year round. One of particular interest is an invasive seaweed, *Gracilaria vermiculophylla*. Before the discovery of the seaweed in the Southeast in the early 2000s, Georgia's mudflats were for the most part devoid of seaweeds. Fast-forward to present day, *G. vermiculophylla* is now a dominant species in Georgia's marshes. With no native analog along the Georgia coast, mat-forming seaweed may be altering the marsh's ecological dynamics.

At the Skidaway Institute of Oceanography (SkIO) in Savannah, Georgia, *G. vermiculophylla*'s role in local salt marshes is studied in great detail. Through a number of research projects, the seaweed has been identified as important in the creation of physical structure on the once bare mudflats. The highly branched seaweed provides habitat that attracts small invertebrates, leading to more small crustaceans on mudflats with the seaweed versus bare mudflat. Such a shift in the abundance of invertebrates can have important implications for Georgia's salt marshes at large, as these small invertebrates form the base of the food web and are particularly important for shorebirds.

Current studies at SkIO investigate the impacts of *G. vermiculophylla* on top predators. The concentration of invertebrates in areas with *G. vermiculophylla* may impact predators that rely on these invertebrates for food. On the one hand, the concentration of prey may be beneficial to predators. On the other hand, *G. vermiculophylla*'s complex structure may inhibit foraging, making it more difficult for predators to detect and capture their food. Either outcome could affect the shorebirds that migrate into Georgia's salt marshes to take advantage of the great abundance of their invertebrate prey.

With shorebird communities increasingly under pressure due to habitat loss and climate change, understanding what factors influence successful migration is key to shorebird conservation. Identifying *G. vermiculophylla*'s role in shorebird communities will aid in the management of such essential habitat as the overwintering grounds of the Georgia coast.

Message from the President by Richard Hall

For backyard birders February is an exciting month. As seeds become scarce in the woods, finches are increasingly attracted to feeders. Look out for Pine Siskins and Purple Finches among the more regular Goldfinches and House Finches; in invasion years, siskins can occasionally outnumber all the other species!

Also, keep in mind that the weekend of February 13-16 is the Great Backyard Bird Count. This is an opportunity to contribute your bird sightings from your yard (or anywhere you decide to go birding) to a long-standing national citizen science project; see gbbc.birdcount.org for more details.

And don't forget that you can always submit your bird sightings to eBird (www.ebird.org)!

After January's cold snaps, most of us will be looking forward to spring. Luckily, for many birds, spring starts in February. The dawn chorus will begin as our Eastern Bluebirds, Northern Cardinals and Carolina Wrens ramp up for the breeding season. Migratory waterbirds also begin their journey north; if you're extremely lucky you may encounter a local rarity such as a Ross's Goose, or a flyover flock of Sandhill Cranes.

By the end of the month our first migratory songbirds, the swallows, will start to show up at large water bodies. Clean out your Purple Martin houses, as the birds can be back at their nests as early as Valentine's Day!

Athens Christmas Bird Count 2014

by Eugenia Thompson

An astounding fifty-one participants came out and counted 92 species of birds on a chilly overcast December 20, 2014.

The top five species in descending order were Common Grackle, Cedar Waxwing, European Starling, Chipping Sparrow, and American Robin. At the other end of the continuum, only one individual of each of the following species was counted: American Black Duck/Mallard hybrid, Eastern Screech-Owl, Blue-headed Vireo, Vesper Sparrow, Great Egret, Redhead, Rufous Hummingbird, and Double-crested Cormorant.

After a record number of Red-headed Woodpeckers last year, only two were counted this year. None of the following were seen or heard: Northern Bobwhite, Barn Owl, Horned Lark, Gray Catbird.

Mark your calendar for December 19, 2015, and come help count.

Members' Night—A Time to Share

summary of January meeting by Liz Conroy

Thanks to the many and enthusiastic members of the audience who braved the winter cold to attend Members' Night on January 8 at SCNC. Also, much appreciation to the passionate presenters who produced poems, puns, photos and prose for the evening's program.

Presenters included: Carol Ludwig (birding in Ecuador), Chuck Murphy (birds from many lands), Richard Meltzer (birding in Nicaragua), Krista Gridley (backyard hummingbird), Steve Duke (April Fool's binoculars), Kathy Parker (birding on Midway Atoll), Leila Dasher (poem), Bob Ambrose (poem), Alison Huff (birding in Peru), Eugenia Thompson (vulture story), Jonathan Evans (poem), Suzie Degrasse (licensed bird rehabilitator) and Steve Holzman (hawk banding in Wisconsin).

The poems presented at this meeting may appear in future issues of *The Yellowthroat* when permission is granted and space permits. Also, Suzie Degrasse mentioned that she can be contacted by email: suzannedegrasse@gmail.com or by phone: 706-255-7395 regarding questions or concerns about rehabilitating injured birds.

Finally, bird photos may be submitted to *The Yellowthroat* for consideration from this meeting or from anywhere! Photos must be clear and include date, location, subject and photographer's name for the accompanying caption. Email: yellowthroat@oconeeriversaudubon.org

Great Backyard Bird Count Weekend

by Kate Mowbray

Does frigid weather keep you inside during the winter? On February 13-16, snuggle up near a window with a warm drink and your binoculars to participate in the Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC). The GBBC is an online citizen science program that people can submit their counts to create a snapshot of where birds are across North America.

Participating is easy and if you use eBird, submitting data is even easier. All you need to do is count birds for 15 minutes to as long as you'd like on one or more days of the GBBC. When counting over a period of time in one location, you want to record your highest number of a species at one time. After you finish counting, submit a checklist for each day and new location if you choose to venture out to a different location.

For more info about how to participate in the GBBC, visit: <http://gbbc.birdcount.org>. Sandy Creek Nature Center is also asking for participants to take counts and report them to Kate Mowbray, Naturalist at SCNC. You can drop off your counts or email them to:

kate.mowbray@athensclarkecounty.com. Have fun!

GOS Fall Meeting by Ryan Chitwood

Balmy temperatures and clear skies brought me to Jekyll Island's for my second ever Georgia Ornithological Society fall meeting (October 10-13, 2014). Field trips to sites that would not normally be accessible always make for memorable birding moments, especially when guided by welcoming experts. Cumberland Island offered a variety of habitats from beach to marsh to maritime forest.

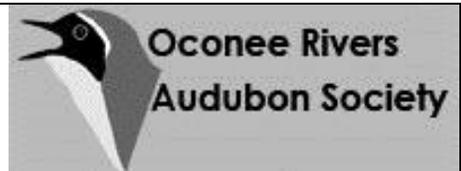
Highlights from this trip included thousands of migrating swallows on the wing as well as two osprey perched just twenty feet from our group. But instead of these awe-inspiring moments topping my list for this trip, peaceful afternoons spent at the Jekyll Island Campground Bird Sanctuary made memories for me that weekend.

John Mark and I had over ten species of warbler at that site alone on the weekend in what seems like a very insignificant patch of habitat. This got me thinking about ORAS's Backyard Wildlife Sanctuary Program: if one patch like this can yield so many good finds and therefore be an important stopover habitat for migrating birds, why not try to provide the same benefits to wildlife around our homes?

These thoughts echo the theme of the GOS meeting and the mission of ORAS itself and lead me to the conclusion that an individual can make a difference in the conservation of birds and other wildlife. To this tune, I thank ORAS for organizing like-minded individuals and for providing opportunities for young people like me to work towards this conservation aim.

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(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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Photo of Pine Siskin by Richard Hall on St. Catherine's Island—December 14, 2014

Oconee Rivers Audubon Society

President Richard Hall
President@oconeeriversaudubon.org

Vice-President Brian Cooke
vp@oconeeriversaudubon.org

Treasurer Alison Huff
treasurer@oconeeriversaudubon.org

Secretary Mary Case
secretary@oconeeriversaudubon.org

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