



The Yellowthroat

Voice of the

Oconee Rivers Audubon Society

February 2016

Vol. 27, No. 2

**Next Meeting:
Thursday, February 4, 7:00 p.m.
Sandy Creek Nature Center**

For the 7:00 p.m. presentation:

The Melting of the Polar Ice Caps

Gary Kochert, a retired UGA professor who lectured on geology and glaciology as a naturalist with Polar Star Expeditions, will give a talk on "The Frozen Ocean."

Kochert plans to discuss the formation of and seasonal changes in sea ice in the Arctic and Antarctic and describe some of the animals that rely on sea ice to survive.

Ice in the Arctic Ocean has been decreasing in area and thickness in recent years. Someday soon the entire ice cap may disappear during the summer. These changes will have profound effects on Arctic wildlife and on the political and economic relations among nations that border the Arctic Ocean, according to Kochert, a retired botany and geology professor and former head of UGA's Plant Biology Department. From 2002 to 2010, Kochert served as a naturalist, lecturer and Zodiac driver with Polar Star Expeditions.

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.

Message from the President: ORAS Conservation Grants Program Awards

by *Brian Cooke*

I recently came across Walt Kelly's comic strip, *Pogo*. Set in the Okefenokee, *Pogo* was primarily used for political satire. The most lasting quote from *Pogo* was from Earth Day 1971, when Porky Pine and Pogo find themselves face to face with a pile of litter in the swamp. Pogo says to Porky Pine, "We have met the enemy and he is us."

As environmentally-minded citizens, many of us are bombarded by negative news regarding conservation of our natural resources and wildlands. However, many success stories take place all around the country each day. Thanks to the many donors and members of Oconee Rivers Audubon Society, ORAS Conservation Grants have afforded researchers, educators, and land managers the opportunity to improve our local environment. Your donations and gifts support the great work done by fellow citizens each year.

This January, we were lucky to receive many great grant applications. Grants were awarded to the following projects:

- James Wood, a UGA Ph.D. candidate conducting a service-learning course that will implement a native pollinator garden with bird-friendly habitat and public access at Athens Regional Hospital;
- Citizens for South Jackson, a community group from Jackson County aiming to make educational materials and bird-friendly habitat at the South Jackson Elementary School public trail system;
- Suzie Degrasse, a wildlife rehabilitator from the Athens-Clarke County region working on accommodating migratory bird rehabilitation into her current facility; and
- Samuel Merker, a UGA MS student working with Dr. Richard Chandler on Canada Warbler research in the Appalachian Mountains.

We are excited to be able to provide funding to these causes, and look forward to their success stories. The ORAS Conservation Grant program is one of ORAS's lasting impacts on bird research, habitat conservation, and education throughout the Athens-Clarke County area and beyond.

The Seventh Diner (Part 1) *by Tim Homan*

Early November, the upper Suwannee River. Six of us (Bob Gadd, Brown Widener, Gary Appelson, Linda Russell, Page Luttrell, and myself) launch two canoes and two kayaks at the US 441 landing just south of Fargo, Georgia.

If the weather is good, you automatically feel lucky on the first day of a trip down a blackwater river. You know that your maneuverable island of paddlecraft and packs glides between the boundary of blackwater and blue sky. And better yet, you know that you are riding one of the earth's great cycles—the hydrologic cycle, the round river—down the conveyor belt of a stationary streambed, your speed the sum of your will and gravity's beckon, a small V-shaped wake the only record of your passage.

The river ran dark and slow and silent. If you launch at the convergence of three conditions—sunny sky, low water, no recent rain to dilute color—the rich darkness of the upper Suwannee captures and keeps reflections. On those days the river gleams shiny and black, its surface a magical and slow-moving obsidian mirror.

Our canoes and kayaks cut through panes of blackwater glass, furrowing an inverted perfection of forested sky. We floated at the hinge of two heavens, the downward one white with clouds near its blue bottom, the illusion of depth and a second dimension on a single plane. Buttressed trunks tapered to slender boles reaching far below into that blue-heaven home of fish; those white clouds slowly coasted beneath the topmost branches; gray beards of Spanish moss waved in the wind below our boats where there was no breeze. The undersides of dragonflies hovered above the bellies of those deep-water clouds.

White sandbars urged landing and more lunch. Some of the bald cypresses were still feathery green; others had already turned russet. Their sharply flaring conical buttresses quickly slanted to large circumferences. Equal lengths of buttress and bole reminded us of upside-down funnels. Single-cypress islands held fast and defiant as forts at midstream, providing evidence of severe and prolonged drought in the past.

The low water let us look upon strange sights. Forest-made fences stretched tight between the pillars of two neighboring cypresses. These fences were constructed of sturdy interconnected knees and the modified, wood-railing roots leading from knee post to knee post. All of this infrastructure—rails and posts—hung suspended above the river. These barriers prevented easy trespass between trees, holding the nearby bank in and keeping us out.

Short squat tupelos often bordered the river banks early on, their pot-bellied buttresses frequently bulging into bizarre shapes. Below the buttresses, wide-spreading skirts of

interwoven roots snaked out in all directions. For much of the year, these roots hold hands with their neighbors beneath the blackwater blanket, a weave of root wrapped around root. We often noticed where a straight row of young tupelo had been planted by the level line of high water on sandbar or soil bank.

Our bird count was still low when we paddled into Florida early on the second day. The birding by ear and binocs would remain below average for the rest of the trip, especially for waders and waterbirds. Unlike Florida's spring-run rivers further south, the upper Suwannee's sand bottom and wildly fluctuating water levels prevent the growth of aquatic vegetation. Our wader count was still stuck at one White Ibis, one Green Heron, and occasional Great Blue Herons at trip's end. Wood Ducks were common and squealed away from our approach in increasingly larger groups as we worked our way downstream. A single Pied-billed Grebe, a couple of American Coots, and a half dozen Double-crested Cormorants filled out our tally of waterbirds.

Eastern Phoebes, tails pumping and relatively tame, were the most conspicuous of the riverside passerines. We heard far more Red-bellied, Red-headed, and Pileated Woodpeckers than we spotted. We, primarily Brown and Page, heard short snippets of the Hermit Thrush's lyrical flute music. The six of us identified only two wood warblers—Black-and-white and Yellow-rumped—by eye or ear. Our most exciting sighting flew high overhead: four Sandhill Cranes heading south.

Day 5 dawned to dark clouds solidly lidded to every horizon, a drenching rain drifting our way. Brown showed us the incoming weather on his iPhone. The stoplight colors on his screen were fairly accurate predictors of our day's prospective progress. We would don raingear and go in light-rain green, hunch down and keep paddling more slowly and cautiously in steady-shower yellow. Torrential-rain red, however, would run us off the river.

The November morning was warm enough that we didn't have to worry about becoming overly chilled, especially the kayakers who paddled dry under their skirts. The intermittent showers, a few in the yellow category, slowed us down but did not bring us to a refuge-seeking stop. Limestone bluffs rose steadily higher over the day's distance, their faces heavily pitted and scalloped by the long sculpting of the acidic water.

Mid-morning, we gawked as a slender doe swam the width of the now much wider Suwannee. She quickly climbed the steep bank and ran away from our colorful flotilla. Immediately after the doe disappeared, Page and I saw a rut-randy buck hit the brakes at the top of the bluff. He spooked and trotted downstream, closely paralleling the river from the bluff's rim.

After making 13 or 14 miles our group arrived at Woods Ferry, the Suwannee's first upstream river camp, a little earlier than expected. We hauled all our gear—most of it piled in a high-sided wagon and a Walmart shopping cart—up the long and sharply switchbacking boardwalk to our reserved cabins: sides completely screened, light, fan, electricity, hot showers in the bathhouse.

We gathered for supper in the spacious camp pavilion—six picnic tables and three combination light and ceiling fans—at 5:30 and dusk. After supper, the evening still early but dark, a warbler-sized bird fluttered in out of the light rain and slowly flew a few erratic loops around the inside edge of the well-lit shelter, circling right over our heads as we sat at the picnic table. Brown identified the blurry bird as a Black-and-white Warbler and further astounded us by sexing it as female while she was still in motion. After three or four laps the small passerine flew out into the cool night and drizzling rain again. We walked up fairly close—the bicolored bird didn't seem to mind—and confirmed that it was indeed a Black-and-white Warbler.

Before we returned to our desserts and after-dinner drinks, the songbird re-entered the shelter and began flying flattened loops again, this time with a little more speed and confidence. The wood warbler landed and rested for half a minute on the darker outside seat of our picnic table before winging up to and landing on a ceiling fan blade. The bird just stood there, slowly looking around, a bit confused and dazed from our perspective. Maybe it was a worn-out migrant looking for a warmer and drier place to roost.

After a much closer look at the stationary and well-lit warbler, Brown transgendered it to the more boldly black-streaked male. Maybe Brown was finally slipping a bit in his very late middle age like the rest of us. Maybe he couldn't hear quarks clacking against each other inside rocks anymore, maybe he would have to employ the very best of binoculars to peek into black holes now.

After a short stint of standing on the fan, the passerine began pecking at the top side of the blade and gobbling down bug carrion by the beakful. His motions became more animated, more fluid and forceful. He flitted to other blades on the same fan, pecked and pecked, darted up to the nearly level top of the motor housing and gulped down more dead insects and spiders. (To be continued).

Discounted Bird Seed at Sandy Creek Nature Center: Going Fast!

All bird seed remaining at the Sandy Creek Nature Center gift shop is 40% off original prices. Varieties include Cardinal Choice, Morning Song Deluxe, Morning Song Wild Bird Feed, Grey Stripe Sunflower seeds, thistle seed and year round suet cakes. The shop is open Tuesday through Saturday from 8:30 to 5:30 p.m. Call Katie at 706-613-3615 Ext. 235 to check availability or for other questions.



Photo of Black-and-white Warbler by Brown Widener, Woods Ferry River Camp, Hamilton County, Florida—Nov. 8, 2015

The Living Bird by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology
reviewed by Liz Conroy

A special Valentine's Day or birthday gift for your favorite birder might be a pair of warm wool socks. But if the sock drawer is already stuffed full, consider giving the new hardcover book from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology: *The Living Bird—100 Years of Listening to Nature*, 208 pp.

The breath-taking photography by Gerrit Vyn includes detailed close-ups of adults, nestlings and eggs. Often it seems like you are right there as the photo is being taken. Readers of any age will thrill at the lively photos of many colorful birds singing, soaring and feeding. Adults may inspire new birders while perusing this handsome book with youngsters.

Well-known authors such as Barbara Kingsolver, Jared Diamond, Scott Weidensaul and others contributed a variety of thoughtful essays. Suggestions on ways individual citizens can help protect birds and an interesting history of the Cornell Lab in Ithaca, New York are included as well.

One of the most memorable pages in this book is the dedication page with a lovely shot of a Yellow-billed Loon. The words are for all of us: "We dedicate this book to all of you who spread your love and knowledge of birds and the natural world to others. You are needed now, more than ever."

The Living Bird, published by Mountaineers Books, 2015.
(www.mountaineersbooks.org)

Rivercane *summary of January meeting by Liz Conroy*

Thanks to Thomas Peters, a 2013 graduate of UGA's Master of Landscape Architecture program, for his talk on rivercane (*Arundinaria*) on January 7. Rivercane, the only bamboo native to the United States, has a rich cultural history and ecological significance particular to the Southeast.

Rivercane includes three recognized species. *Arundinaria gigantea*, typically a taller plant, has a dense "squirrel tail" branching pattern. *A. tecta*, also known as switch cane, is seen frequently around Athens in boggy areas such as Cook's Trail at Sandy Creek Nature Center. *A. appalachiana* is smaller, deciduous, and endemic to the higher elevations of North Georgia.

Rivercane provides important habitat for numerous and diverse species such as swamp rabbits, the endangered canebrake rattler, Swainson's warblers, and swamp skippers.

Before European settlers colonized the Southeast, rivercane covered millions of acres of lowlands, providing a plethora of ecosystem services in the form of wildlife habitat, forage, and riparian buffering. These "canebrakes" or vast cane thickets have been all but eradicated over the centuries by overgrazing, alterations in hydrology, development, and by competition from invasive species like Chinese privet.

The demise of cane has meant decreasing cleanliness of our waterways. The roots and rhizome network below canebrakes act like a giant sponge, slowing down runoff, stabilizing soils and filtering pollutants. The stems aboveground trap organic matter from floodwaters naturally building soil quality. Peters described a study from Southern Illinois University showing canebrake is three times more effective than hardwood forest at mitigating agricultural byproducts in runoff such as nitrates and phosphates.

Propagation of this plant is complex due to infrequent flowering and a general lack of knowledge on cloning methodology. Peters is one of the few people growing this plant in large numbers for the purpose of environmental restoration.

Peters discussed ways to propagate rivercane and explained how he divides clumps of roots in the winter and plants them as quickly as possible in loamy, well-drained soil. "Rivercane's main mode of reproduction is clonal spread—like all bamboos. When an individual flowers after about 50 years or so of vegetative growth, it dies," he explained.

Also, he noted success in growing new plants from rhizome cuttings. Cuttings must be placed in plastic bags right away to keep them moist. "It's a cool season grass," he added. "There's lots of growth in the spring and fall." Once the cane is a mature plant, it has a long life span and is tough. But the seed is not tough; it can't be dried and stored like many other seeds. "The seed looks like a grain of rice, and you've got to plant it quick or it'll dry out and be worthless. About May 10

through 25 is the tight window of the time that cane often blooms in our latitude."

Peters helped restore rivercane at several sites. Last winter he planted half an acre at Cowpens National Battlefield, SC, where canebrakes influenced Revolutionary War battle movements. He provided 80 seedlings for a study done in Athens by the US Forest Service. The South River Watershed Alliance purchased plants that Thomas grew for a demonstration planting along the South River in Dekalb County. A large sale is pending for February to the US Fish and Wildlife Service for a restoration planting at Sequoyah National Wildlife Refuge in Eastern Oklahoma.

Currently, work is being done along the river banks at the State Botanical Garden of Georgia. The SBG provided funding for a massive invasive species removal along the Orange Trail. Peters asserted: "Canebrake restoration following invasive species removal could establish a more mechanically stable, environmentally appropriate, and aesthetically appealing landscape." There has been interest in planting rivercane and other aggressive natives along the Orange Trail; he hopes to remain involved in the project. "Rivercane once covered more than 11 million acres in the South, from Florida all the way to Texas. It's time to help restore it, and I will always be dedicated to the cause."

Thomas Peters encourages conversation and collaboration on the topics of canebrake ecology and restoration. Call: 706-207-6913 or email: trpeters@uga.edu

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The Yellowthroat
Published monthly by the
Oconee Rivers Audubon Society
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