



The Yellowthroat

*Voice of the
Oconee Rivers Audubon Society*

January 2012

Vol. 23 No. 1

**Next Meeting:
Thursday, January 5, 7:00 p.m.
Sandy Creek Nature Center**

For the 7:00 p.m. presentation:

The Urban Rusties of Athens

Patti Newell, Ph.D student at UGA's Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources, will present new insights about the Rusty Blackbird. This bird is now recognized as the fastest declining songbird species in North America. What is causing the decline? Evidence points to the modification and loss of high quality habitats on the wintering ground.

Rusty Blackbirds seem to require a specific arrangement of wetlands where they forage on invertebrates and sources of tree mast such as small seeded acorns (willow oak and water oak) and pecans.

In Athens we have our own wintering flock of urban Rusty Blackbirds. Patti will discuss the Athens area flock that she is studying and the results from her telemetry work with this flock. Also, she will discuss how the birds move over the Athens area landscape between pecan groves and wetlands and some of the mechanisms driving this movement.

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.

Advanced eBirding:

summary of December meeting by Page Luttrell and Eugenia Thompson

Thanks to Dr. Joel McNeal for presenting the December program, **Advanced eBirding: How to turn a backyard bird list into valuable conservation data.** Joel gave a comprehensive overview of eBird, a real-time, online checklist program started in 2002 by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the National Audubon Society.

In addition to explaining how eBird works, he gave tips on entering sightings, such as information on whether you are stationary or traveling/moving and whether you are counting all birds in one site or focusing on just one species (i.e. rare sighting).

Also, he discussed recent changes in the current program to make it easier to enter data. Similar to the CBC and BBS, all reports are reviewed by experienced ornithologists to verify accuracy. However, even if your sighting is "invalidated," it will still stay on your personal list.

Joel's main message was similar to the familiar slogan from Nike: **JUST USE IT!** Explore the site, ebird.org. It provides plenty of other information, such as bird distribution and prevalence, besides the data entry.

The Georgia Museum of Natural History

summary of special ORAS social for all birders by Liz Conroy

The Georgia Museum of Natural History on the University of Georgia campus in Athens opened its doors to birders on the night of Friday, Dec 2 at 6:00 p.m. Many specimens were on display, including the famous West Point Dam Ivory Gull.

The works of local artist Philip Juras—paintings of Georgia landscapes as they would have appeared in the early explorer William Bartram's times—were enjoyed by all. Drinks and light snacks added to the merriment. The turn-out by ORAS members and friends was impressive. Thanks to Bud Freeman and Liz McGhee for arranging this social. Last, but not least, much appreciation for Alison Huff who served the fine wine.

New Year's Resolution – Love a Snake!

by Todd Pierson

Georgia is home to a great diversity of amphibians and reptiles, including snakes. The state's large size and different physiogeographic regions provide habitat for a variety of snakes—41 species of 3 families.

Despite our state's great diversity of serpents, many species are rapidly declining; some are even threatened with extinction. Snakes suffer most from habitat destruction and fragmentation, but other causes—especially human persecution—take their toll on Georgia's native snakes.

Perhaps the most universally recognized Georgia snake is the Eastern Diamond-backed Rattlesnake (*Crotalus adamanteus*). This large viper lives in the coastal plain and prefers open, sparsely-vegetated sandy areas. Longleaf forests and sand hills that this species inhabits have been reduced to mere ghosts of their former existence, and population numbers and densities of *C. adamanteus* have subsequently declined. In fact, the only places where this species persists in all of its historical glory are the few coastal islands spared from intensive development.

An additional threat to *C. adamanteus* (and other rattlesnakes) in southern Georgia are rattlesnake roundups. In the weeks leading up to these (still legal!) barbaric events, residents collect rattlesnakes from across the state. During the events, the animals are frequently kept in less-than-ethical conditions and manipulated to perpetuate the misunderstanding of rattlesnakes among the general public.

Rattlesnake roundups harm local populations of the snakes—populations that are already under tremendous pressure from habitat fragmentation. Similar threats—over-collection, persecution, and habitat destruction—threaten the Timber Rattlesnakes (*Crotalus horridus*) of the northern Georgia mountains as well.

Another fascinating, yet disappearing, species in Georgia is the Southern Hog-nosed Snake (*Heterodon simus*). These incredibly cute snakes are non-venomous and specialize on eating toads—a behavior that explains their upturned, shovel-like snouts. These cousins of the more common and widespread Eastern Hog-nosed Snake (*Heterodon platirhinos*) are restricted to sandhills of the Coastal Plain and have declined with the destruction of this habitat.

Mysteriously, they have also disappeared from regions where their habitat remains relatively intact, leaving herpetologists scratching their heads. The fossorial habits of this species have led some biologists to blame the spread the invasive fire ants for the mysterious decline, although the true cause has yet to be determined.

The “poster-child” for snake conservation in the Southeast is six feet long, shiny, and solid black. The Indigo Snake (*Drymarchon corais*) is the largest non-venomous snake of

the U.S. It uses its strong jaws to crush its prey—including rattlesnakes. This tremendous serpent was once common across the Coastal Plain of the Southeast, but it, too, has declined with habitat destruction. Adults move great distances during the summer, and their forays now bisect highways, agricultural fields, and other disturbed areas.

Another issue involves the dependence of this species on Gopher Tortoise burrows for overwintering. The plight of Gopher Tortoise populations also shows a downward trend. Other species that depend upon this “keystone” creature of the Coastal Plains have similarly declined.

Gopher Tortoise populations have been harmed by a wide range of factors: The sand ridges they inhabit have been subjected to extreme development. Moreover, tortoises have been collected by humans for food or pets; such actions have helped decrease their populations.

In addition, turtles (especially tortoises) have a life history seemingly predestined for extinction. They usually take decades to reach sexual maturity, and they increase in fecundity with age, putting an emphasis on longevity—a bad strategy in a world where old age for reptiles is increasingly difficult to reach.

As mentioned earlier, Gopher Tortoises are the keystone species of the longleaf wiregrass ecosystem. The burrows they create are critical for the survival of a wide range of species, including other amphibians and reptiles: the Gopher Frog, Indigo Snake, and Eastern Diamond-backed Rattlesnake. Despite all the threats, there's a reason for optimism: Orianna Society was founded in 2008 for the sole purpose of saving the Indigo Snake. With its success and growth have come projects to save Gopher Tortoises, Eastern Diamond-backed Rattlesnakes, and the entire ecosystem that all of these species depend upon.

Also, opposition to rattlesnake roundups is building. Pressure is being put upon Georgia politicians to end these destructive events. Please help! The outlook for Georgia's snakes remains uncertain, yet the success of these organizations offers motivation to keep working for a brighter future: <http://www.oriannesociety.org/>



TODD PIERSON 2011

November 2011 Clarke County Bird Sightings Summary *by Richard Hall*

93 species were reported to eBird during November, compared with 103 in 2010 and 87 in 2009.

The most exciting find of the month was a **Golden Eagle** migrating over the S Milledge fields on 14th, only the second documented county record (JN). The same site also hosted a **Lincoln's Sparrow** on 2nd (RH), the county's second **Le Conte's Sparrow** on 4th (RH), 10 flyover **Great Egrets** and a probable **American Bittern** on 5th (JN, KG), a female **Redhead** on 12th (RH) and multiple **Vesper** and **White-crowned Sparrows**.

In an otherwise quiet month for waterfowl, the highlights at Lake Herrick were the first recent record of a female **Northern Pintail** flying over on 10th (MB), and a very obliging **Horned Grebe** on 27th (RH). New county high counts of 20 **Pied-billed Grebes** at Lake Chapman on 11th (RH, MJ), and 85 **Killdeer** in fields at Charlie Bolton Road (JN) were recorded.

The month was also notable for several exceptionally late-lingering migrants, with new county late dates set for **Philadelphia Vireo** and **Black-throated Green Warbler** on 2nd, **Tennessee Warbler** on 9th and the second-latest date for **Swainson's Thrush** on 3rd, all in the author's Five Points yard. 21 **Tree Swallows** at Lake Chapman on 30th also constituted a record late date (MB).

Observers: Mirko Basen (MB), Krista Gridley (KG), Richard Hall (RH), Mitchell Jarrett (MJ), James Neves (JN)

New Year Message from the President *by Richard Hall*

For your 2012 resolutions: Try the 20 bird minimum daily requirement: Identify 20 species of bird each day, on your way to work or through the office window. This will hone your identification skills and heighten your awareness about seasonal changes in bird abundance. Check out:

<http://birdchaser.blogspot.com/2011/10/20-bird-minimum-daily-requirement.html>

Share your observations: Keeping track of the birds coming to your feeder, seen on vacations and on field trips, can be extremely valuable citizen science data for assessing national or global bird population trends. Why not enter your backyard lists into eBird? <http://ebird.org>

Volunteer: ORAS members can volunteer to help local wildlife in many ways: Our volunteers help certify backyards as wildlife habitat, clear trash and invasive plants from our green spaces, and engage the public with nature through field trips or open days. See the ORAS website or talk to an ORAS committee member at a speaker meeting to find out how you can help. Have a great New Year!

And . . . Love a Hummingbird!

excerpt from DNR website submitted by Gary Crider

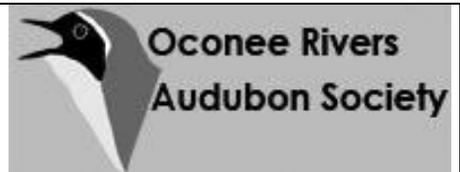
Georgia's wintering hummingbirds still need nourishment during the cooler months. Georgians should keep their hummingbird feeders up during the fall and winter because during these seasons some fast, fly-by friends will be buzzing by ice-covered windows throughout the state! Nine species of hummingbirds can be seen in the state -- Ruby-throated, Black-chinned, Anna's, Broad-tailed, Broad-billed, Rufous, Calliope, Allen's and Magnificent. The Ruby-throated is the only hummingbird that nests in Georgia with very few birds seen over wintering here. Most of the hummingbirds seen in Georgia during the winter months are western visitors. Wintering hummingbirds begin arriving as early as August; however, they appear at feeders anytime throughout fall and winter. In winter, the hummingbird with the longest migration route and North America's smallest hummingbird are among the hummingbirds that migrate here.

The Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Wildlife Resources Division (DNR/WRD) is encouraging people across the state to keep up at least one feeder during the winter months so the DNR can document western hummingbirds that find their way to Georgia. If a wintering hummingbird visits a feeder this year, it may return next year.

Georgians who spot any of the unusual hummingbird species that migrate through our state in winter months are encouraged to report their sightings to WRD. Who knows, you may be the first person to report a rare hummingbird, such as the Buff-bellied which is one of the unusual species WRD is surveying for. To report wintering hummingbird sightings in Georgia, please contact the Nongame Program office in Forsyth at (478) 994-1438 or write to: Wintering Hummingbirds, Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Wildlife Resources Division, Nongame Conservation Section, 116 Rum Creek Drive, Forsyth, Georgia 31029. <http://www.georgiawildlife.com/node/502>

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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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Did You Know? *by Mark R. Tercek – President and CEO
of The Nature Conservancy*

Think about the elusive Kirkland's warbler, a songbird that is no bigger than a tennis ball. It flies some 3,000 miles from its warm Caribbean haven all the way home to the Michigan pine forests to breed. Catching a glimpse of one of these rare birds is a special treat.

Oconee Rivers Audubon Society

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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.

