



The Yellowthroat

*Voice of the
Oconee Rivers Audubon Society*

March 2012

Vol. 23 No. 3

**Next Meeting:
Thursday, March 1, 7:00 p.m.
Sandy Creek Nature Center**

For the 7:00 p.m. presentation:

The Beauty of Plant Habitats in Georgia

Georgia's Wild Gardens Botanical photographers, Hugh and Carol Nourse, will present the beauty of plant habitats throughout Georgia with close-up views of wildflowers in their natural habitats. This photographic collection came from their work on *Guide to the Natural Communities of Georgia*, authored by Leslie Edwards, Kay Kirkman and Jon Ambrose.

Hugh and Carol were the major photographers for the *Guide*, trailing after the authors to every corner of Georgia—from St. Mary's in the Southeast to the Chickamauga Battlefield in the Northwest to Rabun Bald in the Northeast and to Lake Seminole in the Southwest.

In addition, Hugh and Carol Nourse have independently authored several books, including *Wildflowers of Georgia*, *The State Botanical Garden of Georgia*, and *Favorite Wildflower Walks in Georgia*.

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.

Pine Plantation Management

summary of February meeting by Vanessa Lane

Thanks to Dr. Vanessa Lane for presenting the February program, **Pine Plantation Management and its Effects on Wildlife**. She discussed commonly used methods to change understory plant characteristics to improve pine productivity and how these methods can affect wildlife habitat.

She described the similarities and differences between traditional row crop agriculture (corn) and pine plantations. In most cases, row crop agriculture creates little wildlife habitat; birds and other wildlife are confined to weedy field margins. Traditional agriculture also requires several treatments of herbicides and pesticides annually to protect crops from competing vegetation and insects.

In comparison, pine plantations often receive only 1-3 applications of herbicides throughout the rotation—anywhere between 20-80 years. Unlike traditional agriculture, pine plantation managers don't seek complete weed control; they just want to give the pines a head start in the first 1-5 years of growth. Wildlife habitat management is important to most pine plantation managers; hunting leases bring in millions of dollars annually to land owners!

Vanessa then discussed differences between herbicides and pesticides. Insecticides are fat-soluble compounds meant to kill animals. This means that insecticides can bioaccumulate and negatively affect non-target species. (Recall how DDT caused eagles to decline). In contrast, herbicides are water-soluble. They're typically filtered out by an animal's kidneys in a few days. Most common herbicides are also less toxic to animals than ordinary table salt.

Her message was "The Only Constant in Nature is **Change**." Choosing not to manage a piece of land is still a form of management. She emphasized that it's important to know what you want in your forests and to know what you're managing for. For example, you can't manage for Pileated Woodpeckers, which need mature forest with big trees to feed and nest, while managing for Indigo Buntings, which need shrubs and grasses that get shaded out by big trees.

Pine plantations give land managers the unique ability to have almost complete control of what they want their pine forests to look like thanks to the many tools available.

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

83 species were reported to eBird for Clarke County this month, compared with 92 in 2011 and 72 in 2010. The cold snap on 3rd resulted in some excellent waterbird sightings, including 11 **American Black Ducks** and 2 **Gadwall** on the Oxbow Lake, and the first eBird record of **American Herring Gull** from Lake Chapman the same day (RH, MJ, JN). Lake Chapman also held good counts of 13 **Lesser Scaup** on 4th (RH, JN) and 63 **Ruddy Ducks** on 15th.

New county high counts were made of 15 overflying **Bonaparte's Gulls** at Lake Herrick on 9th (MB, RH) and an impressive 156 **American Pipits** along Charlie Bolton Road on 28th (JN). **American Woodcocks** were heard displaying throughout the month, with a maximum of 4 at the State Botanical Garden on 29th (KG).

The Athens landfill held a **Loggerhead Shrike** and 6 **White-crowned Sparrows** on 4th (RH, JN). **Fox Sparrows** were recorded on the UGA campus (RH), Lake Herrick (MB) and the Pinecrest subdivision (VL, JN).

Karla and Bill O'Grady's backyard continued to hold a **Rufous Hummingbird** throughout, and 2 **Pine Siskins** from 17th-23rd (BKOG).

Contributors: Mirko Basen, Krista Gridley, Richard Hall, Mitchell Jarrett, Vanessa Lane, James Neves, Bill and Karla O'Grady.

Turtles in Trouble *by Grover Brown*

Imagine traveling back in time more than 250 million years ago. The world would appear completely different. You would be standing in the middle of Earth's one supercontinent, Pangaea. There would be no flowering plants and no mammals. *Tyrannosaurus rex* was but a mere twinkle in an ancestral theropod's eye.

One recognizable creature, however, would be the turtle. Granted this turtle (*Proganochelys*) had horns on its head and a club tail. Still, even a child could identify it as a primitive turtle. This is because over the millions of years of their existence—even through two worldwide mass extinctions—turtles have remained relatively unchanged.

Now fast-forward 250 years (<0.0001% of the time turtles have spent on Earth) from the present. According to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and Turtle Taxonomy Working Group, as many as 54% of Earth's turtles could go extinct within this time period.

This statistic shows that turtles and tortoises are considered the most endangered vertebrate taxon on the planet. Habitat fragmentation, degradation and alterations—such as fire suppression or wetland draining—have negatively affected their populations.

Currently, one of the biggest threats to turtles is human consumption. With the rapidly expanding human population in Asia, turtles are collected by the metric tons all over the world, packed in crates and shipped to Asian food markets.

Turtles cannot be sustainably harvested. It takes a long time before turtles can reproduce. The offspring they do produce have very small chances of survival. Thus, even the removal of a few adult females may take that turtle population decades (possibly a century) to recover. In particular, large females are critical to stable, healthy populations. Why?

Consider the fact that most turtles are sexually dimorphic (i.e., adult males and females look different). Typically females grow larger than males. This makes sense evolutionarily because gravid (the reptilian equivalent of pregnant) turtles are rigid and cannot expand, so they must grow larger in size to make room for more eggs. To a turtle trapper, these large turtles mean more money in the bank.

This topic is now hitting close to home for many of us. You may have heard the news that our turtles are finally receiving statewide protection. In recent years, thousands of tons of our turtles have been shipped overseas to the same Asian markets that have been eating their native turtles to extinction. This year regulations have finally been set by the Georgia Department of Wildlife placing bag limits for Georgia turtle species. Though the limits have been set relatively high (3,100-6,200 turtles per year), it is still a step in the right direction.

I can only hope that regulation will be adequate. Otherwise our turtles could face the same fate as many Asiatic turtles: extirpation or worse, extinction. Turtle trappers will argue that in Georgia every pond, river, and wetland swamp is filled with turtles. They cover every log and every cypress knee, but the catch is that the turtles you see in these wetlands are the same turtles every year. Remove them, and they will not magically reappear next year. So while it seems to some that we have an inexhaustible supply of turtles, it's quite the contrary. Conservation is not just the protection of rare species, it is "keeping the common things common," as Dr. Whit Gibbons reminds us.

Please help protect our turtles: Educate those around you about what is happening to them and why it is important to protect them. They have been part of our world for 250 million years and play important roles in many ecosystems. Also, turtles are valuable in medical research. Some can live for more than 150 years. Thus, turtles offer insight into the secrets of longevity.

On a more personal scale, whenever you see a turtle crossing the road, help it—when it's safe to do so—to the other side in the same direction they were heading. If you try to relocate a turtle to what may seem a better, safer habitat, it will only try to find its way back home and likely end up crossing more roads. Finally, please encourage conservation efforts and education so future generations may enjoy the many turtles we adore.

The New Rules Regulating Sale, Export, and Farming of Our Freshwater Turtles

by John Jensen (GA DNR Nongame Conservation Section)

Last month, the Georgia Board of Natural Resources voted unanimously in favor of new rules regulating the sale, export, and farming of freshwater turtles in Georgia. It was a monumental step forward in ensuring that the turtles inhabiting our streams, rivers, ponds, and lakes will remain a conspicuous and important component of our natural heritage for future generations.

Before the adoption of these rules, freshwater turtles not listed under the Endangered Wildlife Act were completely unregulated. This meant there were no collection limits, no permits needed, and no reporting requirements.

The urgency for regulating the trade of these reptiles coincides with the rapidly increasing international demand for them as pets, traditional folk medicines, and food. This demand is especially centered in eastern Asian countries, primarily China, where turtle meat and parts are believed to provide human longevity and sexual vigor when consumed. Such an unsustainable demand for turtles has been around for centuries, but until recently Asian species were the target of the trade.

Sadly, the epicenter of world turtle diversity, southeastern Asia, has been nearly wiped clean of wild turtle populations, with most remaining species either critically endangered or non-native, the latter released in hopes of rebuilding harvestable populations. Without a harvestable turtle population, Asian demand has shifted to the part of the globe containing the next highest turtle diversity and abundance—the southeastern United States.

Since the early 1990s, millions of turtles, some farm-raised, but many others wild-caught, have been exported out of the Southeast for markets in Hong Kong, China, and in the case of pet turtles, Europe.

How many of these turtles were coming out of Georgia wetlands and how many people were making a living selling them? We have no firm numbers because trappers were not required to register with the state by obtaining a permit nor were they required to report their catch. We don't know what the impact has been, but because Georgia was the last state in the turtle-rich region to have any regulations, we have good reason to suspect our state was heavily targeted by trappers.

We only need to look across the Pacific Ocean to see what unregulated turtle harvest can do to native populations!

All turtles have a life history that puts a premium on high adult survivorship to offset naturally low egg and hatchling survival. Removing just a few adult turtles from a population, especially females, can lead to population crashes, as has been proven in many instances.

With the new regulations now in place, anyone wishing to possess more than 10 freshwater turtles in Georgia is required to obtain a commercial turtle permit and annually report details of their harvest. Commercial turtlers will be subject to annual quota limits of 100 to 1000 turtles, depending on the species.

We believe that these limits are strict enough to prevent overharvest while being generous enough to allow limited commercial enterprise. And, because we will (for the first time ever) have harvest data made available to us, if these limits prove inadequate to sustain turtle populations, we will have the supportive information necessary to adjust the rules.

Sightings Reported at January and February Meetings

11/28 - Congaree River, 3 **Bald Eagles**, Roger Nielsen
12/14 - Barnett Shoals Road, Oconee County, **Loggerhead Shrike**, Steve Duke, Mark Freeman, Carole Ludwig
12/18 - Pettit Lane, 70+ **Turkey Vultures**, Denise Zevos
12/25 - Everglades NP, **Peregrine Falcon** attacked an immature **Little Blue Heron**. The heron got away.
Tim Homan and Page Luttrell

1/1 - Caco Cay, Bahamas, **Olive-crowned Warbler**, **Bananaquit**, **Magnificent Frigatebird**, Carole Ludwig
1/1 - Everglades, **Roseate Spoonbill**, **Anhinga**, Erin Cork
1/1 - Cape Coral, FL, **Burrowing Owl**, Mirko Basen
1/2 - Fruitville Florida, drake **Cinnamon Teal**, Mirko Basen
1/3 - Bobbin Mill Road, **Rufous Hummingbird**, Kevin Long and William Dopson
1/26 - Bogart backyard, **Barred Owl**, Alison Huff
1/28 - Bear Hollow, **Cooper's Hawk**, Alison Huff
1/30 - Side yard, **Eastern Towhee**, Brad Hogue
2/2 - Whitehall Road, **Great Horned Owl**, Vanessa Lane



Photo of Alabama Map Turtle by Owen M. Kinney

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Athens Christmas Bird Count 2011

by Eugenia Thompson

Final results of the Athens CBC (held December 17, 2011) were 86 official species counted by 37 observers. Some of our intrepid local birders scanned the area to find nine more species for the count week. Complete results are available at <http://birds.audubon.org/christmas-bird-count>. Mark your calendars for next year's CBC! It's on December 15, 2012.

Field Trip to Lake Hartwell

by Page Luttrell

Seven ORAS members braved the wind and cold on Saturday, February 11, to check out loons and other winter visitors at Lake Hartwell. They were rewarded with views of small groups and/or singles of Common Loon, Horned Grebe, Pied-bill Grebe, Red-breasted Merganser, Canada Goose, and Bufflehead. Bonaparte's and Ring-billed Gulls flew over the choppy waves. A very obliging Hermit Thrush allowed us to admire him as he searched for berries in the nearby woods. Wally and Minnie Crider graciously opened their warm home to us for lunch where we were entertained by various passerines and woodpeckers taking turns at their backyard feeders and birdbath.

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