The Yellowthroat

Voice of the
Oconee Rivers Audubon Society

May 2017 Vol. 28, No. 5

Next Meeting:
Thursday, May 4, 7:00 p.m.
Sandy Creek Nature Center in Athens

For the 7:00 p.m. presentation:

Controlling Invasive Plants at Home

Gary Crider, invasive plant specialist and local weed warrior, will talk about non-native plant infestations and describe their impacts on native communities, identification tips, and control measures.

Invasive, non-native plants disrupt ecological functions and reduce biodiversity. People can play a critical role in helping prevent the introduction and spread of invasive plant species. He will discuss ways that all of us can reduce non-natives and how that helps increase biodiversity in an area.

Crider is a team leader with the Memorial Park/Birchmore Trail Weed Warriors, a volunteer group that works to limit the spread of invasive plant species in the Athens area. In recognition of his many efforts, Gary received the 2013 Alec Little Environmental Award, an award given annually for environmental activism and education in the Athens area.

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:

SANDY CREEK
Nature Center

Go left at the end of this short road. The Education & Visitor Center building is a short way down the road on your right.

Spring Bird Walks – Think Spring!

Bird walks are from **8 a.m.-11a.m. or noon**. However, attendees may leave early. Please dress for the weather, wear practical shoes, hats and bring insect repellent and snacks/water as desired. (Also, check ORAS announcements and website for any last minute changes to this schedule).

If you have other questions please contact Ed Maioriello at: fieldtrip@oconeeriversaudubon.org

- May 07: **Lotsanotty (Jackson County)**

Spring Field Trips (out of town) *

May 06 7:00 a.m. Charlie Elliott Wildlife Center

* Please check listserv announcements for any late changes.

2017 Alec Little Environmental Awards

by Larry Dendy

Elizabeth (Liz) Conroy, a long-time environmental author and activist, and Firefly Trail Inc., an organization supporting a proposed paved path for alternative transportation between Athens and Union Point, are the recipients of the 2017 Alec Little Environmental Awards.

Conroy has written numerous articles and columns for newspapers and magazines about nature, wildlife and environmental issues and has been active in the Community Tree Council, Sandy Creek Nature Center and the Oconee Rivers Audubon Society.

The Firefly Trail is a proposed 39-mile path that follows the corridor of the old Georgia Railroad Athens Branch. Work on the first link—between downtown Athens and Winterville Road—is underway and may be completed by year's end.

The Alec Little Environmental Award was established in 1991 to honor John A. (Alec) Little of Athens, who worked closely with many environmental organizations in Georgia before his death that year.

Impacts of Supplemental Feeding

summary of the April meeting by Liz Conroy

Thanks to Daniel Becker for his talk on Supplemental Feeding and Infectious Diseases in Wildlife on April 6. He described how both intentional and unintentional feeding of wildlife have been associated with disease outbreaks.

Intentional feeding of wildlife includes putting food out in bird feeders. In the U.S., about $5 billion is spent each year on feeders, food, and other related supplies. Other examples include park visitors and tourists feeding white ibis in Florida, sting rays in the Caribbean, and primates in Asia.

Unintentional feeding of wildlife occurs due to the way humans have converted landscapes and provision wildlife by agricultural and urban activities. Examples include: sparrows eating crumbs at outdoor tables, geese eating in farm fields, and raccoons and possums eating out of trash cans.

Becker noted that both feeding types have been associated with disease outbreaks in the animals involved. One well-known example from research by Cornell Lab of Ornithology and VA Tech, showed how feeders likely facilitate bacteria spread among house finches. Mycoplasma conjunctivitis still affects many house finches today and is associated with population decline.

Becker and his colleagues used meta-analysis to synthesize data to help answer such questions as: 1) does supplemental feeding increase disease risk? 2) are certain types of feeding more risky? 3) does increased provision of food enable animals to become more robust and better able to recover from a disease outbreak?

Research shows that supplemental feeding tends to increase disease risk for bacterial and viral infections, especially in feeding used for management or recreational purposes. However, in some cases supplemental feeding reduced disease risk, as with feeding of primates in Bali.

Intentional feeding practices can worsen the health of animals in many cases, except in the careful feeding of wildlife by experts for conservation purposes. Tourism-based feedings showed up in almost all studies with negative health results for the animals, primarily because tourism diets are incompatible with the animals' natural life styles.

Simple actions can be taken to reduce disease risk with intentional feeding of wildlife: Find the right kind of food. Project FeederWatch has a list with appropriate foods for feeders. Avoid crowded situations. When animals aggregate, they can more easily share pathogens. Some species even become aggressive. For birds, space feeders far apart or move them periodically to avoid crowding.

Also, regular cleaning of feeders is important (about every two weeks). Use one part chlorine bleach to nine parts water. Clean bird baths frequently, too. Change water every few days for cleanliness and to prevent mosquitoes from breeding. Simple steps can help limit disease in wildlife!

Photo of Bald Eagle by Brandon Coogler, Anchorage, Alaska—June 20, 2015

Bald Eagle Sighting in Alaska

by Brandon Coogler

As my undergraduate career comes to a close, I wanted to share one of my greatest personal birding experiences:

During the summer of 2015, I was lucky enough to have the opportunity to help for a week with a boys' camp in Wasilla, Alaska. I traveled with a group of people from my home church in Snellville, Georgia, and we arrived a couple of days before the camp started. We used this time to go sightseeing and travel around the Anchorage area for some experiences of our own.

One of the places we visited was the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center. This place was home to many species of animals, and I will never forget the day we went.

The regular feeding of the grizzly bears was about to take to place, and we lined up to watch. When they threw the first piece of food to the bears, it was stolen by a Bald Eagle in mid-flight. The whole thing happened fast, but I followed the eagle as it perched atop a pole almost 100 feet away.

Next thing I knew, a second Bald Eagle flew to confront the first eagle for its newly acquired meal. For the next 30 minutes the eagles circled right above us and picked up the scraps of food that the bears missed. I will always remember this opportunity to see such beautiful birds fly above me. It's a memory that I will cherish for a lifetime.

Birding in March in Central Mexico

by Carole Ludwig

Mark Freeman and I embarked on this trip with much anticipation; we were not disappointed in the bird life we observed, the beauty of Mexico or the graciousness of its people.

Some surprising sights included the size and modernity of Mexico City and the dramatic and diverse topography. For example, Mexico has huge mountains and active volcanos as well as fertile valleys and sandy beaches.

Our two knowledgeable and personable guides were Hector Gomezdesilva and Paul Prior. Our congenial fellow birders were mostly Canadians, two Americans, a Brit and an Aussie.

We identified about 199 birds in the four states we visited. Our day began at 6:30a.m.with breakfast eaten in the van after a quick stop at the equivalent of a Golden Pantry (only without the good biscuits). Seeing the birds was not a walk in the park. After a drive on winding mountain roads to a higher elevation, hiking up a steep mountain path was the norm. We also visited a cactus forest, a habitat which made keeping to the path necessary and "visiting the loo" problematic. But we were always rewarded with plentiful avian species. Only when we visited Veracruz did the scenery change to coastal plain, beaches and truck farms cultivated with donkey power.

One afternoon, we went to the Monarch Butterfly roosting area near Zitacuaro. The molting butterflies hang from trees in dark masses until they fly away on their multigenerational migration to the North.

Another day, we climbed an ancient Olmec-Mayan pyramid near Cacaxtla that was partially restored and sported many colorful murals.

What were our favorite sightings? Mine no doubt was the spectacle of two male Squirrel Cuckoos sparring over a female watching from a nearby branch. I must mention the rare Red-faced Warbler that I found. Also, on my favorites list was the Ferruginous Pygmy Owl, Red Warbler and Mexican Chickadee. Mark enjoyed seeing the Russet-crowned Mot-Mot, the Chestnut-sided Shrike-Vireo, Olive Warbler, and Bridled Sparrow (because we worked so hard to see it.) We both loved seeing and hearing the Gray Silky-Flycatcher which seemed oblivious to the din made by passing semi-trucks. The species we saw varied widely: from hummingbirds, warblers, flycatchers and sparrows to mot-mots, trogans, orioles, tanagers, and the rare Sumichrast's Wren.

We highly recommend this trip to any ambitious birder, since it is both mentally and physically demanding. It also helps to have a tolerant digestive tract since what Mexican waiters describe as mildly spicy can set my tongue ablaze. I was fine as long as I stuck to the widely available plain steaks, eggs, avocados, potatoes and the bottled water.

Photo of Gray Silky-Flycatcher by Mark Freeman, Cuemavaca, Mexico—March 8, 2017

Photo of Broad-billed Hummingbird by Mark Freeman, Zitacuaro, Mexico—March 4, 2017

Mountain Laurels and Bumblebees

by Dale Hoyt

If you walk a mountain trail this time of year you will often find it bordered by evergreen shrubby trees, their glossy green foliage covered with hundreds or even thousands of one inch, bowl-shaped flowers. These are the blossoms of Mountain Laurel. Each white flower has five petals, each dotted with two dark red dots.

A closer look will reveal that every dot is really an anther (the flower structure that produces pollen) held in a recess in the white petal. Attached to the anther is a translucent white filament, whose other end is attached to the ovary at the center of the flower. It's not obvious from just looking, but each stamen (the filament and attached anther) is under tension, the secret to the flower's pollination mechanism.

Bumblebees are the most common visitor to Mountain Laurel flowers. They seek two things from a flower: nectar and/or pollen. As a visiting bee stumbles around the flower bowl it bumps into a stamen, releasing the anther from its pocket in the petal. The stamen, which is under tension, springs upward like the arm of a medieval siege weapon, dumping a cloud of pollen on the bee. The pollen adheres to the bristles that cover the bee, so when it visits other flowers some of this pollen will be brushed onto the female structures, thus fertilizing the plant.

By using a toothpick you can mimic the action of a bumblebee and spring the stamens yourself.

This ballistic system improves the chances that a visiting bumblebee will receive a load of pollen. But if no bee visits the flower there is a backup system. As the flower ages the petals relax, releasing any unsprung stamens. The pollen is released and some of it lands on the same flower, as well as nearby flowers. A single Mountain Laurel plant can be covered with thousands of flowers, so this mechanism assures that some seeds will be produced in the event that bees are in short supply.

Studies in natural populations of Mountain Laurel show that only about 8% of the seed produced comes from self-pollination. This includes pollen reaching other flowers on the same plant as well as flowers that pollinated themselves. So most of the work is done by bees, but there is a failsafe system for seed production in place.

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Photo of Mountain Laurel by Emily Carr, State Botanical Garden, Clarke County—April 16, 2017

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Submit items to address above or e-mail *The Yellowthroat* editor Liz Conroy: yellowthroat@oconeeriversaudubon.org Articles, artwork, notices, and sighting reports welcomed. The deadline for submissions is the first day of each month.