



The Yellowthroat

Voice of the

Oconee Rivers Audubon Society

November 2013

Vol. 24, No. 9

Next Meeting:
Thursday, November 7, 7:00 p.m.
Sandy Creek Nature Center

For the 7:00 p.m. presentation:

Bombs, Burning, Bachman's Sparrows:
The role of the Department of Defense in
southern pine savanna conservation

ORAS President Clark Jones will describe the conservation efforts occurring on Department of Defense (DoD) lands in Georgia and neighboring states. He'll include specific information from his own research at Fort Benning on Bachman's Sparrows. In addition, he'll discuss the advantages and disadvantages of DoD conservation actions.

Jones is a Postdoctoral Research Associate for the National Park Service and the University of Georgia (UGA). He recently completed his Ph.D. in the UGA Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources. As part of his dissertation he examined endangered species management, habitat fragmentation, and bird communities at Fort Benning near Columbus, 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 Education & Visitor Center building is a short way down the road on your right.

Backyard Wildlife Habitat Certification

by Kate Mowbray

The ORAS backyard wildlife habitat certification had a superb summer. We certified six yards since May 2013:

James M. and Fran E. Cawthon 8/28/13
Helen Hume 8/1/13
Alison Huff 8/1/13
Wendell Chasen 6/13/13
Beckie Lawrence 5/22/13
Beth Cross 5/9/13

How about your yard? We look for four parts of a habitat: food source, water, shelter and a place to raise young. These can be natural sources or human-made. After you send in the application, we'll visit your yard. All certified yards receive a sign to display. Hopefully, neighbors will get inspired, too!

Also, we need additional certifiers. If you are familiar with plants or birds, please join us. It's a great way to get ideas for your own backyard habitat and to help ORAS as well! Email Kate Mowbray at kateemowbray@gmail.com for more information or to have your own yard certified.

Christmas Bird Count 2013 *by Mary Case*

The Christmas Bird count is Saturday December 14, 2013. We need group leaders for either two or possibly three areas, including the Botanical Garden and the north side of Athens (Alison Huff's area). We always welcome anyone who wants to participate. Email Mary Case: mecase@uga.edu

SCNC Birdseed Sale-Ends November 1

Sandy Creek Nature Center (SCNC) is holding its annual birdseed sale! Please support SCNC and buy birdseed you'd normally purchase elsewhere. Senior Citizens are eligible for free delivery. Orders may be placed by mail, phone or online. Deadline for ordering is November 1. Check out: www.athensclarkecounty.com/sandycreeknaturecenter

September 2013 Clarke County eBird Sightings Summary *by Anna Joy Lehmicke and Clark Jones*

September, as it always is, has been an exciting bird month in Athens with 120 species reported to eBird. This is lower than last September's count (139), perhaps because some migrants that are normally seen in the last week of September have yet to show up.

Mississippi Kite movement has petered out, with no birds reported past mid-month in Clarke or Oconee County. Broad-winged Hawks were observed passing through during the month, along with a few Bald Eagles (RH, RL) but our other autumn raptors, American Kestrels and Merlins, have yet to arrive.

The first Ruby-crowned Kinglet of the season was seen on September 26th at the Botanical Gardens (JN, RH), our first winter resident to show up this year. It was followed closely by two Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, one seen on the last day of the month at Lake Herrick (MB) and one seen on 9/28 in Newtown(CJ).

Sandpiper migration slowed in early September, with several Solitary Sandpipers seen in the first two weeks (RH), and a few Spotted Sandpipers observed throughout the month. A small number of Baltimore Orioles have been reported (JW, RL) from the State Botanical Garden of Georgia and several locations in Oconee County (RL, JMS).

Warbler migration is in full swing, with 26 species seen throughout the month. Cape May (RH), Black-throated Blue (JN, JH, KG) and Black-throated Green (RL, JH, JW, MB, RH, B&KO) showed up in the last week of the month, while some early migrants such as Cerulean (PM) and Nashville (MB) Warblers were mostly seen in the first week. September was a great month for Empids, with confirmed sightings of Least Flycatcher (RH), Alder Flycatcher (TM, RH, MB), and a very cooperative Yellow-bellied Flycatcher (first reported by MB on 9/26 and seen by many others since). Thrush migration has also been busy, with multitudes of Swainson's Thrushes, sightings of Veerys (KG, RH, RL, JN), and some late-month sightings of Gray-cheeked Thrushes (JN, JH, MJ, JMS, JW and others).

The most exciting sighting of the month (perhaps of the year) occurred on the final day of September, when John Whigham located a Tropical/Couch's Kingbird at the State Botanical Garden. While initially identified as a Western Kingbird, inspection of photographs and later sightings confirmed that it was indeed either a Tropical or Couch's. The two species are separable only by voice, and alas, the bird did not vocalize enough for definitive identification. Either way, it is a state record for Georgia!

Observers - B&KO-Bill & Karla O'Grady, CJ-Clark Jones, JH-Jim Hanna, JM-John Mark Simmons, JN-James Neeves, JW- John Whigham, KG-Krista Gridley, MB-Mirko Basen, MJ-Mitchell Jarrett, RL-R Lavender, RH-Richard Hall

Life above the Wrack Line: Nesting American Oystercatchers & Wilson's Plovers on the Georgia Coast *summary of October meeting by Liz Conroy*

How Georgians love their beaches! When most people travel to the Golden Isles, they look forward to jogging or walking along the shore. It's a time to mindlessly stroll all over the long stretches of sand. Or, is it?

Master student Abby Sterling—researching nesting shorebirds with UGA Professor Robert Cooper—reminded the audience at the October 3 ORAS meeting how the beach is a dynamic ecosystem and home to many shorebirds. While discussing her research on several barrier islands, she encouraged everyone to be aware while enjoying the not-so-empty stretches of sand. Throughout her talk, Sterling described the challenges for shorebirds as they try to raise their chicks in the face of many anthropogenic (human-caused) as well as natural threats.

Now, more than ever, shorebirds struggle to survive and reproduce as increasing numbers of people use the entire beach for recreational purposes. Unfortunately, this use includes exploring the sands above the high tide line. But this is often where many shorebird nests are hidden.

“Please stay on the wet sand,” urged Sterling as she showed the audience many photos of hard-to-see nests—actually, just scratched-out hollows in the sand known as “scrapes.” Unleashed dogs and strolling humans flush the birds off their nests, she continued. Some people think, “So what?” After all, the parents return to their nests. But the relentless summer sun can cook the eggs and kill the developing embryo inside when the parent is not there to shade the nest with his or her own body. Also, it helps if beachgoers know that March to August is nesting season and stay alert to the possibility of nearby nests. If an adult bird acts agitated by calling or “dive-bombing” or dragging its wing as if injured, it is desperately trying to protect its nest. The basic message from the parent bird is, “Please steer clear. My nest is here!”

In addition, predators prowl nesting areas to pounce on the parents, their eggs or the chicks, especially at night. Sterling listed a mindboggling number of shorebird predators such as: minks, foxes, weasels, coyotes, ravens, grackles, crows, seagulls, hawks and feral cats. Even the lowly ghost crab preys on young chicks!

Her current study focuses on American Oyster Catchers and Wilson's Plovers on Little St. Simon's, Cumberland and Little Cumberland Islands. The goal of Sterling's research is to identify both the areas where these shorebirds are nesting and if certain areas of the beach are more productive than others. She is beginning to analyze the nest site data to try to find patterns and draw conclusions. The results will help land managers better understand which areas of beach to protect for these beautiful birds and how to better educate the public about them.

Try A Catalpa Tree Today! by Liz Conroy

If someone hollers, “There’s something white and squiggly with a black head crawling down your back,” you might jump. I did, but I jumped for joy. It was my first experience with the famous catalpa “worm,” so highly prized by knowledgeable southerners who enjoy fishing. Largemouth bass are said to love them, and some enterprising Georgians sell them as fish bait.

My own discovery occurred while I was checking my young catalpa tree for storm damage in the spring of ‘13. A few years ago, Athens-Clarke County Community Tree Council members gave away plain-looking sticks at EcoFest—an environmental event held each year at the Classic Center. It was a Southern catalpa (*Catalpa bignonioides*—in the same family as the trumpet creeper and cross vine). The volunteers described it as a native tree that grows cigar-shaped pods and a wide spreading crown with big leaves. The leaves turn bright yellow each fall. Carefully, I planted the branchless twig with its small root ball at the top of my driveway in a sunny, open spot. The deer neither munched nor rubbed it. Quickly, my little stick began to grow.

“It’s a worm tree,” a neighbor born and raised in South Georgia told me. “Give it some time and watch what comes.” She was right. An early delight was when the blossoms opened, looking like a cascade of delicate white orchids with thin, purple markings etched inside showing the pollinators where to go for nectar.

I kept watering the young catalpa during the dry spells and checked it frequently. The sapling began stretching outward and upward toward the sky with long limbs and large, simple leaves, bigger than an adult’s outspread hand. With enough water, sun, good spacing from other trees (it does best without competition) and decent soil, a catalpa grows rapidly until it becomes a medium-sized tree with a life span of about seventy years.

Spring ’13 brought plenty of rain, but some showers turned into big storms with strong winds. Then there was trouble.

Catalpa tree owners must always be alert for crown damage from severe weather, according to University of Georgia (UGA) forestry/ecology professor, Kim Coder. In his article, *Southern Catalpa: The Fish Bait Tree*, he wrote, “It is easily damaged by ice and wind storms which usually destroy the crown shape and break crowns out of trees over time.” Sure enough, storms damaged the tree.

In early June, as I pruned broken branches, a tickle began at the back of my neck. “Yikes, what’s that?” I thought and quickly felt the place. To my surprise, a small, white caterpillar with attractive black “lollipop” markings on its back and a light yellow underside squirmed gently in my hand. A black horn stuck straight up out of its backside, like a thin thorn, but softer. A quick Internet search and perusal of *Caterpillars of Eastern North America* by David Wagner confirmed that, yes; this was a young catalpa worm (Catalpa Sphinx caterpillar).

Once more, I called my wise neighbor, who is also a birder, to tell her. She replied, “Akakakaka, yawp, yawp. Know what makes that sound?” I did not. “It’s the Yellow-billed Cuckoo. I think it’s hanging around the catalpa because it likes to eat tree worms.” She was right!

When the summer solstice arrived, I went to take photos of my lollipop babies. They had blossomed into chubby adolescents. The black lollipops markings on their backs had merged into soft, velvety black stripes. The fat caterpillars’ sides were now yellow with black dots.

Here’s a cautionary note, however, for anyone taking photos of caterpillars from beneath a tree: The sounds of rain and the pitter-patter of something hitting the top of my head were not from raindrops. Balls of poop, the size of a capital O in this article, regularly dropped down on my head. The caterpillars launched the poop balls (officially known as frass) by lifting up their little hind ends and popping the balls out into the air. Still, that’s another welcome benefit—good fertilizer for Georgia’s red clay soil.

The lively larvae measured three inches long on June 25, which meant that they were full grown. Suddenly, on June 26, they all disappeared! A friend, who had been showing the caterpillars to her two young children, sadly asked, “Did someone harvest them?” I don’t know, but hope birds got most while the rest traveled down into the soil to pupate, developing into adult moths.

Catalpa trees attract moths whose larvae attract many birds in our area. Interestingly, some native plants, like this tree, host specific moth larvae. As Coder noted in his article, “Catalpa trees are the only host for the catalpa sphinx moth (*Ceratomia catalpae*—Lepidoptera, Sphingidae family).”

At an Oconee Rivers Audubon Society presentation in January ‘13, ecologist John Pickering, an associate professor at UGA and moth expert, explained the importance of moths and their caterpillars to an attentive audience of birders. He asserted, “Moths are God’s way of turning plants into birds.” Why? Birds need crucial protein packets called caterpillars to feed their young in the spring and early summer. It helps birds and other wildlife when humans plant natives such as Southern catalpa trees. Birds eat the caterpillars that eat the leaves.

These hungry larvae may defoliate the tree, but relax. New leaves begin to grow again right away. Outdoors in nature, think of defoliation or leaves with holes as the celebration of the Circle of Life: soil-plant-larvae-bird-soil. Save the perfect leaves for indoor flower arrangements.

Planting host trees for the plant/insect/avian cycle is more important than ever as urbanized areas expand over natural lands. Humans who learn to appreciate caterpillars and the important roles they play are also helping birds and other wildlife improve their chances for survival. Try a catalpa!

Oconee Audubon Society
P.O. Box 81082
Athens, Georgia 30608-1082

Return Service Requested

Non Profit Org.
U.S. Postage Paid
Athens, GA
Permit No. 41

Oconee Rivers Audubon Society



First state record of Tropical/Couch's Kingbird—sighted and photographed by John Whigham on Sept. 30, 2013 at the State Botanical Garden of Georgia

President Clark Jones
President@oconeeriversaudubon.org
Vice-President Richard Hall
vp@oconeeriversaudubon.org
Treasurer Eugenia Thompson
treasurer@oconeeriversaudubon.org
Secretary Mary Case
secretary@oconeeriversaudubon.org

The Yellowthroat
Published monthly by the
Oconee Rivers Audubon Society
PO Box 81082
Athens, GA 30608

Submit information 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. 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.