



The Yellowthroat

Voice of the

Oconee Rivers Audubon Society

November 2016

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Next Meeting:

**Thursday, November 3, 7:00 p.m.
Sandy Creek Nature Center in Athens**

For the 7:00 p.m. presentation:

Untamed: The Wildest Woman in America and the Fight for Cumberland Island

Will Harlan, an award winning author and editor-in-chief of Blue Ridge Outdoors Magazine, will discuss his national bestseller, *Untamed: The Wildest Woman in America and the Fight for Cumberland Island*. His book is centered around conservation on Cumberland Island, a national seashore off of the coast of Georgia and the state's largest and southernmost barrier island.

A candid Q&A and discussion about the many conservation efforts on the island as well as the controversies surrounding the book's protagonist, Carol Ruckdeschel, will follow the author's presentation.

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.

River Cane Donations by Richard Hall

This year Clarke County became the first county in Georgia to reach 20,000 complete checklists in eBird. This is in large part due to the tireless efforts of Karla O'Grady and her husband Bill, who between them have submitted 5,701 checklists!

Bill and Karla were early adopters of eBird, and the State Botanical Garden's designation as a state Important Bird Area was in large part due to their efforts conducting regular surveys recorded in eBird.

To honor the O'Grady's contributions, Oconee Rivers Audubon Society has teamed up with the State Botanical Garden of Georgia to restore stands of native cane (*Arundinaria*), a favored nesting habitat of Swainson's Warblers and other migrants, to the floodplain area (Orange Trail and White Trail).

Many of you have birded (and gotten life birds) here, so please consider donating to restore the floodplain to its former glory. The first cane plantings should occur later this fall!

More details about this project, and instructions on how to donate to this worthy cause, can be found at this website: <http://oconeeriversaudubon.org/node/370>

Athens Area Christmas Bird Count

by Mary Case

The Athens Area Christmas Bird Count will be on December 17, 2016. This is the 117th year that the CBC has taken place since its modest beginnings. The count now covers the 50 states in the U.S. and various countries around the world.

Join us for all or part of the day. You don't need to be an expert birder. We have 14 count areas in Athens. The count circle begins at the intersection of South Milledge and South Lumpkin. Contact Mary Case by email: mecase@uga.edu or Eugenia Thompson by phone: 706.201.5524 or by email: roberthom@bellsouth.net for more info and to sign up.

Georgia's Wildflower Gardens

summary of October meeting by Liz Conroy

Thanks to Linda Chafin for her talk "Ancient Mountains to Modern Shorelines: Adventures in the Flora of Georgia" on Oct. 6. She described how Georgia has one of the richest floras in the eastern U.S. and listed the different regions creating such diversity: Cumberland Plateau/Ridge & Valley, Southern Blue Ridge, Piedmont (which includes Clarke County), Fall Line (Columbus east to Augusta and beyond), Coastal Plain (upper and lower), and Barrier Islands. "We are the only state south of Virginia to have ALL of these eco-regions," she noted. This wide range of environmental conditions contributes to the biological diversity.

Other factors contributing to diversity include: the state spans 4 degrees of latitude (from 31° to 35° latitude), changes in elevation from sea level to 4800 feet, annual rainfall is 46" in Coastal Plain to 70" in the extreme northeast. Such differences throughout the state create habitats that support a wide array of plant species. Chafin pointed out there are 4000 species of native plants (including both vascular and non-vascular plants). Unfortunately, there are also 1000 exotic plant species. She encouraged the group to join in efforts to help eradicate the exotic plants which are outcompeting our natives.

Cumberland Plateau/Ridge & Valley

Layers of sandstone and limestone in areas such as Cloudland Canyon raises the pH of the soil that forms upon it to 6 or 7 as compared to the Piedmont which has much more acidic soils with a pH of around 4. Some areas to see wildflowers in the Cumberland Plateau are the Shirley Miller Wildflower Trail and the Pigeon Mountain Wildlife Management Area. Particularly good times to go include the last weekend of March and first week of April.

What to look for? Virginia Bluebell, Wood Poppy, and Fernleaf Phacelia are some beauties that don't grow naturally in the Piedmont because of their high pH requirement. A special wildflower for the hummingbird is the Eastern Columbine. The dangling, pollen-producing anthers at the tips of its stamens allow hummingbirds and hawkmoths to pick up pollen on their backs as they probe for nectar produced by cells deep in the tip of the flower's spurs. They then pollinate the next flower they visit when the pollen is brushed off on that flower's stigmas.

Coosa Prairies

Discovered in the early 1990's by DNR botanist Jim Allison, these prairies have heavy clay soils that are too dense for trees to thrive. Go here in June as part of a group with The Nature Conservancy or Georgia Botanical Society. Look for the flowers beginning with "Prairie": Purple Coneflower, Dock, Mimosa. Also, Great Plains Ladies' Tresses, Mohr's Barbara's Buttons, and Whorled Sunflower and more grow there. Chafin noted that this area was owned by a timber company that attempted to grow pines and ultimately granted a conservation easement to TNC.

Southern Blue Ridge

This area includes rich, moist, north-facing coves such as Sosebee Cove in the Chattahoochee National Forest. The first week of May is the best time for wildflower walks in such coves when Trilliums are peaking. There are 22 Trillium species in Georgia and these wildflowers occur in most Georgia counties except the SE corner with too acidic soils. Some memorable trilliums of the Southern Blue Ridge include Large White Flowered (it turns pink after it has been pollinated), Yellow, Wake Robin also known as "Stinking Betsy" (smells like a wet dog), Painted, and Vasey's (stems can grow up to two feet tall).

Southeast Piedmont

This is a surprisingly diverse ecotone between the mountains and inner Coastal Plain. Chafin noted that there are 200 species of trees in the Piedmont, many found in Oak-Hickory forests. A variety of spring ephemeral wildflowers also grow there. These are long-lived, slow-growing perennial plants that photosynthesize, flower, and begin seed production in a brief, one-to-two month window that is defined by warming temperatures and a leafless canopy; the window closes when the canopy leafs out overhead and the ephemerals go dormant.

Look for ephemerals such as Toothwort, Rue-Anemone, and Trout Lily in the Oak-Hickory Forest. The latter wildflower has petals that close at dark and during rainstorms to protect the pollen. In the sunshine the petals will open wide and curve back. Other wildflowers of the Oak-Hickory Forest that are not ephemerals include Hepatica, Bloodroot, and Green & Gold.

Chafin asked, "What feature do most spring wildflowers have in common?" The answer was "Elaiosomes," with the root word being "oil." This is a fatty handle on the seeds which ants use to haul the seeds into their homes. They feed the fatty handle to their larvae then throw the seed out into their dump site which is actually fertile soil. Elaiosomes are clearly visible on seeds of Hepatica and Bloodroot.

Piedmont Granite Outcrops

Arabia Mountain, Stone Mountain, Rock and Shoals, and Heggie's Rock are examples of Piedmont granite outcrops. ORAS member Robert Wyatt describes outcrops as "deserts in a forest sea." Vernal pools – shallow solution pits on the surface of some outcrops – are critical for certain wildflowers. For example, Pool Sprites are found in vernal pools on Arabia Mountain and other Piedmont outcrops and are found nowhere else in the world.

Heggie's Rock near Columbia City (north of Augusta) is a Nature Conservancy-owned site that boasts two rare quillworts: Mat-forming and Black-spored.

Fall Line/Coastal Plain

The Fall Line in Georgia is as far inland as a boat could travel in the time before railroads dominated transportation.

Boats could come up rivers and get stuck at the falls at the Fall Line. In this state, the Fall Line is 250 miles long and 20 miles wide; it runs from Columbia to Macon and Augusta. These cities were founded there because boats were off-loaded nearby and the energy from the falls was ideal for powering saw mills and grist mills.

The Longleaf Pine Ecosystem was the matrix forest of the Coastal Plain. It used to be 90 million acres from East Texas to Virginia. Now only scattered fragments remain; about less than 1 million acres. These forests are diverse! Up to 50 plant species per square meter in some areas can be found.

Wetter Coastal Plain ecosystems include Seepage Slopes and Pitcherplant Bogs where water moves slowly and constantly through the soil; Doe Run State Wildlife Management Area near Moultrie, Georgia, is open to the public and is a great place to see Hooded and Yellow Trumpet Pitcherplants, especially when they are flowering in late April. The extremely rare White-top Pitcherplant, highly desired by the florist trade, has only one population remaining in Georgia and no one is allowed to know its location, except a few qualified experts.

Less famous but equally beautiful carnivorous plants in these bogs include Tracy's Sundew and Pink Sundew with their sticky glands used to capture insects. These glands glisten beautifully in the sunlight, and photographers enjoy catching those sunlit moments. Other wildflower beauties found in the bogs are the Yellow-fringed and Bearded Grass-pink Orchids.

The Altamaha Waterfowl Management Area has productive freshwater, tidal marshes which are subject to rising levels of water due to the ocean's tides just like the saltwater marshes. Here one can find the Coastal Spider Lily—the same genus at the rare Shoals Spider Lily on the Broad River but a different species. Look for Southern Wild-rice on the Coastal Plains as well as American Wisteria. The former is the same genus as the wild-rice which grows in the Boundary Waters of Minnesota and was gathered by Native Americans such as the Ojibway. The latter is not fragrant like the exotic, invasive Chinese Wisteria. If it's fragrant, pull it out!

Georgia Coast

Due to the passage of the farsighted Coastal Marshlands Protection Act (CMPA) Marshes Act in 1970 by the State of Georgia to protect its marsh and estuarine areas, we have the ecologically highest quality coast on the Atlantic Seaboard. Our 13 barrier islands are also the least developed islands on the Atlantic coast. Look for Dune Morning-glories and Railroad Vine right in the sandy dunes as well as Spanish Dagger which is a yucca plant and same genus as Spanish Bayonet. Chafin asked Dale Hoyt to describe the symbiotic relationship of the Yucca Moth to this plant. The moth pollinates the flower but also lays its eggs in the ovary. If the moth lays too many eggs, the plant simply aborts the flower! This relationship occurs in all yuccas.

Chafin noted that while Georgia has lots of biodiversity, it also has many threats to its native plant population. The

human population continues to grow, plus timber plantations, exotic pest plants, deer over-browsing, agriculture conversion, and feral hogs damage native plants and their habitats.

Please encourage GA DOT and GA DNR to use ecologically sound management practices such as prescribed fire, feral hog removal, deer herd reduction, and invasive species plant control. Support the GA Conservancy, The Nature Conservancy, and the GA Plant Conservation Alliance.

Linda Chafin's new book, *Field Guide to the Wildflowers of Georgia and Surrounding States* gives more information about wildflowers and where to find them.



Photo of Purple Passion-Flower (May-Pop) near Bear Creek Reservoir by Liz Conroy, Jackson County—August 21, 2016

Backyard Wildlife Sanctuary Program Nest Box Promotion *by Ryan Chitwood*

Become a Certified Backyard Wildlife Sanctuary Homeowner by providing habitat for birds, wildlife, and native plants in our community! Submit an application by the end of the year and receive a bonus nuthatch nest box pending your yard's certification.

For more information:

<http://www.oconeeriversaudubon.org/sanctuary>

Or email: conservation@oconeeriversaudubon.org

Fickle, Fussy, Foolish Crows

by Chuck Murphy

As a semi-serious bird photographer, I typically keep an array of bird feeders filled with an assortment of sunflower and thistle seed, mealworms for the bluebirds, plus suet to attract woodpeckers, etc. This provides me with non-stop subject matter, all day, every day.

I got a bit bored with accumulating a surplus of cardinal and chickadee photos, so I decided to branch out and try something different: Crows! I figured that they are just big boring black birds; we all see them scavenging on our streets and in our backyards every day. How hard could this be? It seemed easy to get nice crow photos to add to my portfolio.

Corvids (crows, ravens, jays, etc.) are known to be among the most intelligent birds, second only to some species of parrots. Relative to body size, corvid brains are as big as chimpanzee and gorilla brains. Two species of crows have even evolved tool-using capability (visit this website: <http://bit.ly/handycrows>). Despite all that, I figured I was smarter than the average crow, so it would be easy to bring one into camera range to pose for a portrait.

A little research indicated that crows are omnivores, and any combination of peanuts, sunflower seed, dog food and cheap cuts of meat should have them flocking in for a feast. Also, per the cover story in the March-April issue of *Audubon* this spring, Cheetos!

As I started making photos from my bird blind, one of the first things I learned is that crows aren't really black: Their heads are an elegant charcoal gray, and their body feathers have an iridescent sheen that varies from green to purple, depending upon the light.

The second thing I learned is that, at least for the murder of crows frequenting my back yard, they're very finicky eaters. You would think that for an intelligent creature typically seen chowing down on an entrée of dead squirrel in the middle of the road, a delicious spread of crow treats would be irresistible. You would be wrong.

I faithfully lay out my crow buffet every morning. Some days, the crows show up early, other days, not at all, even though I can hear them calling in the distance. Even on days when my resident family of five does show up, they'll often walk right by the prepared feast and just eat sunflower seeds that the cardinals have spilled from the feeders.

If you have any tips on bribing crows to pose within camera range, please forward your suggestions to me at chuck@boywithcamera.com.



Photo of American Crow with a Cheeto by Chuck Murphy, Jackson County—March 22, 2016

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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. 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

Correction to October article by James Lindley Wood

“So, on behalf of both the people and the wildlife that are enjoying the garden, a big thank-you to ORAS for supporting this project and making it possible!”

