



The Yellowthroat

Voice of the

Oconee Rivers Audubon Society

November 2017

Vol. 28, No. 9

Next Meeting: Thursday, November 2, 7:00 p.m. UGA's Odum School of Ecology

For the 7:00 p.m. presentation:

Falling in Love with Grasslands: Paintings from Prairie to Páramo

Philip Juras, a Georgia artist, will discuss his long-term exploration of grasslands from the Southeastern United States to the high elevation páramo of the Andes.

Although they are ecologically rich, aesthetically gorgeous, and often tightly linked to human history, grasslands, especially in the southeastern U.S., have been largely lost and forgotten while the plant and animal species that depend on them have become increasingly rare. Juras will present a visual tour of landscape paintings that document his journey of grassland discovery. Drawing on early descriptions of the pre-settlement landscape by chroniclers such as William Bartram and his own studies and adventures in southern nature, his grassland route traverses high mountain balds, grassy Piedmont barrens, historic Alabama prairies, and the once vast pine savannas of the coastal plain. From the colorful seaside meadows of the Georgia coast, his exploration continues beyond the Southeast to the lush tall grass prairies of the Midwest and the gorgeous high elevation páramo of the Andes.

On-campus parking is free and open after 5 p.m. in the S-07 lot off West Green Street.

Directions to School of Ecology from Loop 10 By-pass:

Exit 7 on College Station Road and turn west toward campus.
Turn right onto East Campus Road
Continue north on East Campus Road
Turn left at second red light onto W. Green Street
Turn right into S-07 parking lot (open after 6 p.m.)
The Ecology building is on the north side of the parking lot behind trees (a sidewalk is nearby).

2017 Athens Christmas Bird Count (Mark Your Calendars for Dec. 16)

The 2017 Athens Christmas Bird Count will be Saturday, December 16. We have fourteen sections in our circle, and we will need leaders with some expertise for each. We also need participants for all sections, so no matter what your level of expertise, please consider joining in on the fun.

For more information, or to volunteer, contact Eugenia Thompson (email: erobertthom@bellsouth.net) or Mary Case (email: mecase@uga.edu) or talk to us at the November or December general ORAS meetings.

Announcement: Georgia Ornithological Society Scholarships for Teens (15-18)

by *Larry Carlile*

The Georgia Ornithological Society is once again providing scholarships for two teenagers (ages 15-18 years old) to attend the American Birding Association's (ABA) Camp Colorado on June 23-29, 2018, and one teenager (age 15-18 years old) to attend ABA's Camp Avocet in Delaware July 28- August 3, 2018. The scholarships will cover the full cost of the campus as well as \$500 in travel expenses. The deadline for applications is on December 8, 2017.

For more information: <http://events.aba.org/aba-young-birder-camps/>

For the application form and instructions (to be posted soon): <http://www.gos.org/YoungBirderScholarship>

Backyard Wildlife Sanctuary Program

Become a Certified Backyard Wildlife Sanctuary Homeowner by providing habitat for birds, wildlife, and native plants in our community!

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

Or email: conservation@oconeeriversaudubon.org



Photo of American Crow (juvenile) by Chuck Murphy, Jackson County, Georgia—May 29, 2016

Wise Crows, Foolish Crows

summary of October meeting by Liz Conroy

Thanks to Chuck Murphy, photographer, instructor, naturalist, and more, for his talk on the American Crow (AMCR). He noted a source of inspiration came from “The Meet Your Neighbours Project” (meetyourneighbours.net) which is part of an internet biodiversity awareness project with the motto: “dedicated to connecting people with wildlife on their own doorsteps.”

The specific standards for participation in the Meet Your Neighbours project (founded 2009) call for all subjects to be shot in the wild against a pure white background and returned to nature, unharmed.

Murphy showed photos of dandelions and vultures with the white background; these were some of his first subjects. He then described his growing interest in the AMCR as a new subject. Surely, he thought, there was more to these birds than solid black feathers and sometimes annoying behavior. He discovered that by taking pictures of crows on cloudy days, rather than in full sun, the colors were beautiful. The head is a soft charcoal gray, and the body is iridescent with greens, blues, and purples. If the photo is taken in the full sun, AMCR appears as a glossy, black bird. He described the details of setting up for bird photos in his own backyard: a bright white piece of fabric, perch in front of the fabric with bird bait (peanuts, mealworms, slabs of meat and Cheetos).

Next, Murphy shared interesting facts about AMCR: People hunt this clever bird, and there is a legal hunting season (Nov. 2 to Feb. 24 according to GA DNR website). Crows also can be controlled by lethal means anytime they are perceived to be causing agricultural damage. Other than human hunters, only large owls prey on crows.

Crows do eat grains in farmers’ fields, but they are actually omnivores and eat everything from roadkill, insects, bird eggs, nestlings, snails, fish, and fruits as well as grains. A good book to learn more about their habits: *The American*

Crow and the Common Raven by Lawrence Kilhorn. Other interesting books include: *The Language of Crows* by Michael Westerfield and *Gifts of the Crow* by John Marzluff.

There are ways to tell certain differences in crows, Murphy noted. For example, the male is typically ten percent larger than the female. And, adults have brown eyes whereas juveniles have blue eyes and visible bill hinges. They are also in the Corvid family, which includes jays, magpies, and ravens. Their range includes much of the U.S., especially on the East Coast, but they are not found in South America.

These intelligent birds are very social and mate for life. They have complex relationships with other crows. AMCR family structure means that they are rarely solitary. “If you just see one crow, others are probably within calling range,” Murphy noted. The offspring hang around and help their parents raise the next generation.

Some crows are also a tool users.* The audience was treated to an amazing video showing a crow learning to use tools (in this case, a pair of rigid sticks) to probe out a piece of meat from a small box. “Some crows are hereditary tool users, and others can figure out how to use tools,” he explained.

Crows are also known to have funerals for their dead. They have been observed arriving one at a time to stare quietly at a dead companion and then to move on to allow another crow can do the same. Unlike Pinyon Jays which store seeds and have a large hippocampus—the memory region of the brain—AMCR have a large forebrain for analytical thought and flexible behavior similar to the brain of primates, including humans.

* Murphy also added these comments: “As far as I know, the crow that figured out how to use two sticks was not an AMCR, but from somewhere off our continent. And the hereditary tool users are from New Caledonia and Hawaii.”



Photo of Black-billed Magpie by Katherine Edison, University of Utah, Salt Lake County, Utah—July 20, 2012

Raven's Renditions (Part 1)

by *Tim Homan*

Summer 1988, Canyonlands National Park, southern Utah's redrock and hoodoo country. Wingate Sandstone, Chinle Formation, Moenkopi Formation, and White Rim Sandstone: the high cliffs a geologic layer cake from the Permian, the Triassic, and the Jurassic, each layer with a distinct composition, age profile, and color that changes with the light. Page and I arrived at the small primitive campground late in the afternoon, the day cloudy and surprisingly cool, and put up our tent, a dinky two-person dome.

We are both in the tent, resting from the three-day drive. I am flat on my back with heart issues: a fast pulse with some sort of arrhythmia, painful and thudding, at a ratio of one squirrely misfire every five or six quick beats. The pain is not severe, not excruciating but damned inconvenient and disconcerting nevertheless. I am trying to cowboy up and wait it out. I think it has something to do with too much stress and too much caffeine. There are no phones of any kind around—not pay or cell or smart. We are the only people in camp, and the nearest town with a known hospital, Moab, is more than 70 miles away. Page is beside me, monitoring my heartbeats occasionally. She is quiet, not saying much except “I don't think it's serious, but I really don't know. It's like your heart is hammering too hard and has a bad case of the hiccups.”

While we lay there, waiting ... thud, low moan ... thud, low moan ... for some resolution, both of us hear a long drawn-out sigh—aaahhh, fairly high pitched and feminine sounding. Then another long sigh spoken in the same moderately loud voice, soft and soothing and seemingly empathetic. Either the forest fiddles are playing a totally new tune, or we are no longer alone. We flip the tent flap open, expecting to see a silent hiker or cyclist come to claim a walk-in site. Nothing. Aaahhh, the sigh again, coming from our right a couple of campsites over. We crawl halfway out of the tent, glance to the right and verify that we are no longer alone, that the sighs come from flesh and blood and not the bark of rubbing branches.

Flesh and blood and feathers: a black-as-a-midnight-cave raven with a big bludgeoning honker of a beak is perched in a snag only two campsites and 25 yards away. Proof comes quickly while we watch and listen. The raven sees us, sighs improbably soft and long again—aaahhh—for confirmation. We've never heard a Southern Appalachian Common Raven produce a sound anything like this long and sleepy sigh.

The sighs make us laugh. I focus on these wonderful mimic sounds instead of my heart. We start adding raven words to the sighs for much-needed comic relief. Aaahhh ... poor fur face. When he's finished grunting and groaning and pawing at his chest, I wish he would walk out to the picnic table with a bag of barbecue chips. Yeah, that would be good. Aaahhh ... poor baby. Sounds like he's a goner. I wish he would bring me some barbecue chips ... and while he's at it,

go ahead and finish croaking right here on the table. That way I could fill my gizzard with barbecue chips and eyeballs. Whoa, that would be way better. Aaahhh ... poor me. The dolts are not picking up on my messages.

After a fairly long stint of intermittent sighing, the raven flew away without being fed—chips or eyeballs. Our best guess: that mimic corvid was imitating the sound of the wind blowing through the hobgoblin hoodoos.



Photo of Common Ravens by Richard Hall, Santa Cruz Island, California—March 2017

The Broad-winged Hawk and the American Crows

by *Karla O'Grady*

For several years a pair of Broad-winged Hawks nested in my yard. A friend from Denver visited with a list of lifer birds she wanted. She got very excited about the Broad-winged Hawk, and when I told her I could hear the fledgling calling, we started our vigil. Of course, she would not consider counting it unless she could see it. Unfortunately, we had no luck getting it to come out of the trees.

After finally giving up, she left, and a family of American Crows came into my yard to steal suet. Since I buy expensive suet, I was not at all happy to see them. I chased the crows away, but, as soon as I sat down, they came right back.

Once again I chased them, clapping and yelling, but as soon as I sat down again on the deck, the crows returned. I chased them yet another time only to see the fledgling Broad-winged Hawk fly over my head and chase them all of the way out of the yard. This time they didn't return, but the Broad-winged Hawk did come back and sat on a bare branch over my head. At last it was visible to all, but my friend unfortunately had left.

Yet, as everyone knows; that's how birding sometimes goes.

Secrets of the Oak Woodland: Plants & Animals among California's Oaks

book by Kate Marianchild and reviewed by Liz Conroy

I have never hiked in northern California but hope to go someday. Both of my daughters traveled there and loved it. Friends who backpacked and birded in those forests tell me they hope to return.

When I heard about the beautifully illustrated book, *Secrets of the Oak Woodlands*, it sounded worth reading right away. Author Kate Marianchild shares her passion for the plants and wildlife by describing how all forms of life in those woodlands are interconnected. When she first moved to Mendocino County, she marveled at the wonders of a land where the hills are covered in oaks of all sizes. She happily took notes on her encounters with the plants, fungi, birds, and other wildlife there: "Soon I was like a garden spider, alive to everything vibrating in the web around me."

All of her subjects are carefully researched, and their natural history is neatly woven in with her own personal outdoor experiences. Birders will especially enjoy the chapters on the Acorn Woodpecker, California Quail, Western Bluebird, Oak Titmouse, and Western Scrub-Jay. The latter, she writes, is a major predator of Oak Titmouse eggs, nestlings, fledglings, and injured adults. Meanwhile, Steller's Jays, American Crows, and Common Ravens prey upon the Western Scrub-Jays and their young.

Marianchild admires the other native predators, too. She offers interesting details about their behavior and how important they are in keeping the ecosystem healthy. I never knew about the hunting relationship between the badger and the coyote. She writes: "These two species appear to be hunting partners, often trekking in tandem toward ground squirrel colonies, where they scan the turf together for likely meals. While badgers rummage belowground for ground squirrels, coyotes nab the ones that burst out of burrows, catching about 30 per cent more ground squirrels than they would if hunting alone."

The plants, fungi, and other wildlife of the oak woodlands are discussed in separate chapters, and all are neatly organized. At the beginning of each one, readers can quickly skim the origin of the name of a plant or animal as well as the highlights of the pages to follow. At the end of each chapter, the author includes an ecology reference guide.

This book would make an enjoyable holiday gift for anyone who plans to spend time outdoors in northern California and would like to know more intriguing details about the plants and animals inhabiting the oak woodlands there.

Secrets of the Oak Woodland: Plants & Animals Among California's Oaks by Kate Marianchild with illustrations by Ann Meyer Maglinte Berkeley, California: Heyday, 2014



**Photo of Steller's Jay by Katherine Edison,
Snowbird Ski Resort, Salt Lake County, Utah—
May 18, 2015**

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