



# The Yellowthroat

Voice of the

Oconee Rivers Audubon Society

October 2017

Vol. 28, No. 8

**Next Meeting:**  
**Thursday, October 5, 7:00 p.m.**  
**Sandy Creek Nature Center**

For the 7:00 p.m. presentation:

## The Amazing American Crow

Chuck Murphy, local amateur photographer and photography course instructor, will discuss the fascinating natural history of the American Crow. In our backyards, they can be amusing guests, or unwanted pests and predators. Some bird species are smarter than others, and among our local residents, the American Crow is alleged to be the most intelligent. The quest for the perfect crow photo required research and became one of those “The more you know, the more you want to know” situations. His extensive research provides background material for his crow photography.

Murphy has made photos on all seven continents and taught photography courses for OLLI@UGA, UGA-Continuing Education, the State Botanical Garden of Georgia, and other venues. His photos have been featured in local publications and leading national photo magazines, the current National Wildlife Federation calendar and this year’s National Wildlife Federation holiday cards. His photos have been displayed at The Lyndon Arts Center, the State Botanical Garden of Georgia, and the Georgia Museum of Art.

**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.

## Fall Bird Walks (in town)

Bird walks are from **8 a.m.-11a.m. or noon**. However, attendees may leave early. Dress for the weather and wear sturdy shoes. Bring water. (Please check ORAS announcements for any changes to this schedule and be aware that some new bird walks may be added later).

- Oct. 14: **State Botanical Garden (Day Chapel)**
- Oct. 21: **Whitehall (be on time for this walk)**
- Oct. 22: **Oconee Hill Cemetery**
- Oct. 28: **Sandy Creek Park (Campsite Dr.)**

## Fall Field Trip/GOS Meeting

Oct. 15: **6:00 a.m. Cochran Shoals** (More information on where to meet will be available in October).

## State Botanical Garden Photo Exhibit

The State Botanical Garden currently has an exhibit of nature photos created by Chuck Murphy and his colleague Jena Johnson. The exhibit is on display through October 8th.

## Announcement of Fall Grants for 2017

by Ryan Chitwood

Fall is time for grant applications! We begin accepting grants on 9/6. The deadline is 10/18. Recipients can expect a decision by 11/1. We anticipate that 4 to 6 grants will be awarded.

For more information, please visit our website:  
[www.oconeeriversaudubon.org/grant](http://www.oconeeriversaudubon.org/grant)



**Photo of BHNU by Katherine Edison, Morningside Nature Center, Gainesville, Alachua County, Florida—February 18, 2012**

## **Sex in the Sitta—The Unique Social Life of the Brown-headed Nuthatch**

*summary of September meeting by Liz Conroy*

Thanks to Jim Cox, director of the Stoddard Bird Lab at Tall Timbers Research Station, for his talk on Brown-headed Nuthatches. He explained how Herbert Stoddard, founder of the bird lab, understood the importance of fire to maintain the health of the habitat. Stoddard decided to have his own independent research station since other scientists did not value fire as he did. Today, the research continues on the effects of fire on birds.

Cox showed photos of area NB '66 (not burned since 1966) which had been an open area. By 2001, the photo revealed how overgrown the area had become with water oak, sweet gum, and pine. He pointed out how the number of species in an area declines when fire is removed from the system.

Unburned areas lose such species as Red-cockaded Woodpecker, Bachman's Sparrow, Henslow's Sparrow, Loggerhead Shrike and Northern Bobwhite, as well as Brown-headed Nuthatch (*Sitta pusilla*).

Brown-headed Nuthatches (BHNU) have declined by 45% since 1968. It has been a range-wide decline and averages about 1.5% per year. The U.S. has four species of nuthatches. They are found in other countries as well, including S.E. Asia where the Turquoise Brown-headed Nuthatch lives. There is also a separate population in the Bahamas (*Sitta pusilla insularis*).

This endearing bird has a small body, large head, and a squeaky call. (The male vocalization is more strident than the female.) They can live a long time; the oldest female was eight years old and the oldest male was twelve. Usually, they pair for life.

BHNU is also a tool user. Even juveniles use tools such as pieces of bark, tiny twigs or rigid sticks. They depend upon pine cones and pine seeds and cache their seeds under bark. They crack seeds on tree limbs and probe the bark for insects with their tools. They search for food for six or seven hours each day.

Pine trees are not only a source of food but a source of shelter as well. BHNU is not a strong excavator and needs soft wood. Each year the BHNU creates a new nest cavity, and this is important for many other birds such as: Eastern Bluebird, White-breasted Nuthatch, Tufted Titmouse, Great Crested Flycatcher, and many chickadees. Even the flying squirrel benefits from all the work the BHNU does!

Although they have strong site fidelity, a new nest is made each year. This helps reduce the chance of becoming badly infested with feather lice. So although they may come back to the same snag for many years, the birds make a new cavity in it each time they return.

The nest is made from quail feathers, hair pulled out of predators' feces, and string. Eggs are laid early; this is likely to avoid fires and snakes which become big problems as the weather warms. Four or five eggs are typically laid in each clutch. A large nest may have nine eggs, but it's possible that "egg dumping" by another female had occurred.

An important area of research on the BHNU is the Cooperative Breeding Testing Theory. A young bird may hang around the parents who are raising a new brood and will provide help. Usually the juvenile is related. Other birds exhibiting similar cooperative behavior include the Scrub Jay and Red-cockaded Woodpecker. In one case, 200 marked BHNU adults were observed, and 76% did not have helpers, but 24% of them did have helpers. Of the latter, the pairs having a single helper were 87% and those having double help were 13%. Most of the helpers were first season—at 65%. In addition, 98% of the helpers were male. Only 2% were female.

What form does "help" take? The helpers feed the young, assist in defending the territory, and feed the female while she sits on her eggs. Once helpers leave—if their own nests fail—they will come back to help their parents. After all, they usually have just a "one shot attempt." Temperatures rise as summer approaches, and snakes become more active.

Cox asked the audience, "Why would they wait to breed and why would they help another pair to breed?" Direct benefits include kinship ties, skill development, breeding constraints. In addition, dispersal can be costly in terms of energy expenditure and risks, so it's advantageous to wait. He added that only the females incubate the eggs, and when snakes get into nests there's often a high mortality of females. A shortage of females may be key factor.

# Flies, Bees, Wasps, Cowbirds, and Oropendolas – Oh My!

by Dale Hoyt

The tropics are known for complex ecological interactions and one of the most intriguing involves five kinds of organisms: 1) a colonial nesting bird in the blackbird family, the Chestnut-headed Oropendola (*Psaricoilius wagleri*); 2) a brood parasite of the oropendola and other birds, the Giant Cowbird (*Molothrus oryzivorus*); 3) a Botfly (*Philornis* sp.) that parasitizes hatchling birds; 4) colonial wasps; and 5) stingless bees.

Large numbers of female oropendolas construct elaborate hanging nests in the same tree. The nest trees may also be occupied by the nests of wasps or stingless bees. The cowbirds lay their eggs in the oropendolas' nests. Then the oropendola adult raises the cowbird chick, often at the expense of its own.

In Panama, oropendolas nesting in trees with wasps or bees chase away the cowbirds attempting to lay eggs, or remove those eggs after they've been laid. But in trees that have no wasp or bee colonies, the cowbirds are tolerated. The difference in tolerance toward the cowbirds depends upon another insect—the botfly.

Botfly eggs are laid on hatchling birds, and the maggots feed on the hatchlings' tissues. Most hatchlings will die if they are heavily infested with botfly eggs. This is where the cowbirds play a role.

Cowbird eggs develop faster than the oropendola eggs. By the time the host eggs hatch, the cowbird hatchling is already large enough to eat botfly eggs and maggots off the host hatchlings, increasing their chances of survival. As a result, more oropendola hatchlings fledge in the presence of cowbirds than in their absence.

When the oropendola colony is located in a tree with wasp and bee nests, however, the bot flies are kept away. In those circumstances, the oropendolas actively chase off cowbirds. After all, there's no advantage to having cowbirds in the nest in the absence of the botfly.

In short, the nature of the oropendola-cowbird relationship is determined by the abundance of botflies. When botflies are rare, the cowbirds' effect on oropendolas is parasitic. But when botflies are common, it is symbiotic mutualism. The balance between parasitism and mutualism is orchestrated by the presence or absence of wasp and bee nests in the colony tree.

Wasps and bees also add another layer of complexity. They discourage predators such as opossums from robbing the oropendola nests. But the branches sometimes become so overloaded with oropendola nests that they break, killing all the chicks in the attached nests. *C'est la vie.*



**Photo of Chestnut-headed Oropendola nests by Stoney, near El Valle de Anton, Panama**

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=35425040>

## Dessert before Supper (Part 2) by Tim Homan

Page was sitting at the end of the picnic table's length; I was sitting to her left, one seat closer to the center. One of our small camp chairs was tucked under the short side of the table nearest Page, the top tube of its backrest rising an inch or two above the height of the table. A few minutes after closing our trip journals, around 6 and time to start supper, Page spotted a Western Tanager perched on a dead lower limb of a tall Douglas fir along the outer perimeter of camp off to the side of a pop-up camper four sites away. We raised our binoculars and turned the wheels with our thumbs and bird fingers until we were focused on the tanager, a resplendent male about 45 yards out.

While we watched without comment or much enthusiasm, he flew closer to us along the outer edge of camp, alighting low in a ponderosa pine sapling behind the six-person REI tent three sites away. We focused on his vivid colors again, now from the shorter distance of 35 yards. After holding still for a kinglet's eternity, all of 12 to 15 seconds, this animate jewel of the western coniferous forests flapped closer to us again, this time flying diagonally to his left further into the campground, where he landed in another sapling ponderosa pine 15 feet from the picnic table on the empty site two away from us. Now, a little more than 25 yards from us, he began to spark some genuine interest. We sat up straight and glassed the gaudy songbird for the third time. This time his vibrant colors—closer now and set off against the ponderosa's conifer green—elicited our customary comment of mock nonchalance, “ho hum, merely beautiful.”

After the same short interval he skimmed low and came to a stop much closer to us. This time his toes found purchase on the top rung of our site's upraised grill a little less than 10 paces away. We were now impressed by his showy colors, officially interested and appreciative again. We focused on the tanager with newfound intensity and speed, fully aware of how ephemeral a bird and its beauty can be, fully aware of how long it might be before we returned to Western Tanager territory during the male's seasonal splendor again.

He stood there on the highest grating of the grill, as colorful as a tropical parrot, slowly inspecting the ground all around. That close through binocs the passerine's four colors—orange-red of Indian paintbrush, yellow of sundrops, black of obsidian, white of snow—nearly flooded through the glass and splashed into our eyes. Orange-red head, yellow sash on the black wing, more bright yellow on breast, belly, and rump; white wingbar, forked black tail and black saddle splitting the yellow on the back...all of the bird's breeding-plumage beauty so close in the double circle-single image of our binoculars.

Then, when we thought the songbird would surely half-loop around us, a strange thing happened. The Western Tanager winged his way directly toward us, straight toward our optically-aided eyes, creating a strange visual sensation that made us involuntarily recoil and flinch. At the very last part of a second, when it appeared that the increasingly blurry bird was going to smack one of us in the head, he suddenly veered out of our field of focus. Before we had time to think that he had buzzed right over our ballcaps, we both saw him sitting calm as a pet canary atop our camp chair within easy reach of Page's right hand.

We remained still and silent, our unaided eyes gulping down the brilliant colors. He looked like an imaginary cross between a male Scarlet Tanager and a male American Goldfinch, one that kept the tanager's size but whose phenotype retained most of the finch's colors. Our welcome visitor looked at us and our clean picnic table for perhaps 7 seconds, body still except for the quick dartings of his eyes, then took flight across the camp road, over the outhouse and out of sight. He didn't come back the rest of the evening.

Another first for our journals. We had been favored with fairly good views of male Western Tanagers in every national park except Redwood. The one sitting belly up to our picnic table was only our second in Lassen Volcanic. In all of the state and national parks from the north rim of the Grand Canyon through Sequoia and Kings Canyon, Yosemite and Redwood, all of the avian campground mooches had been the usual suspects: those raucously aggressive corvids—American Crow, Common Raven, Stellar's Jay, and the silent-swooping Gray Jay at Lassen. The most common, comical, and persistent of the corvid mooches were the Stellar's Jays, who tilted their jaunty crests this way and that way as they sidled in closer and closer to our stove, who all but offered to stir the soup.

The Western Tanager who sat beside us was probably at least partially habituated to sweet and salty camper snacks, but his appearance at our picnic table had come as a complete and serendipitous surprise. The next day I asked a few people, including the campground host and a ranger monitoring camp occupancy, if they had seen or heard of this kind of behavior from a Western Tanager. Everyone in the small sample said no. Whatever the reason for his presence, we were grateful for the grace of his 7-second gift, and grateful to share our rented table—and the Earth—with a creature of such beauty.

## SCNC Birdseed Sale (Pre-orders Accepted Through October 15)

Buy quality bird seed through SCNC, Inc. (the non-profit organization that supports the Nature Center). Drive through pick-up is Friday, Nov.10 from 3:30 to 5:30 p.m. and Saturday, Nov.11 from 10a.m. to noon. Seniors and anyone with special needs in the Athens area can have their birdseed delivered for free. Pre-orders are accepted until Oct. 15.

Find order forms here:

<http://www.sandycreeknaturecenterinc.org/bird-seed-sale>

Or call Katie at [706-613-3615 Ext. 235](tel:706-613-3615)

## Oconee Rivers Audubon Society

**President** Catie Welch  
President@oconeeriversaudubon.org

**Vice-President** Sam Merker  
vp@oconeeriversaudubon.org

**Treasurer** Alison Huff  
treasurer@oconeeriversaudubon.org

**Secretary** Eugenia Thompson  
secretary@oconeeriversaudubon.org

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Athens, GA 30608

Submit items to address above or e-mail *The Yellowthroat* editor Liz Conroy: [yellowthroat@oconeeriversaudubon.org](mailto:yellowthroat@oconeeriversaudubon.org) Articles, photos, 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.

