



The Yellowthroat

*Voice of the
Oconee Rivers Audubon Society*

February 2011

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Next Meeting at Walker Hall Thursday, February 3, at 7:00 p.m. Sandy Creek Nature Center

Randy Smith, Sandy Creek Nature Center Facility Supervisor, will update Audubon members on the developments going on at the ENSAT building.

We've seen the ongoing construction mess of warning tape, mud, and vehicles. Now we can learn the details about the new exhibits planned for ENSAT:

- the Urban Interactive Learning Center,
- the Woodland Interactive Learning Center,
- the Agricultural Interactive Learning Center.

There will also be a new Sky Center with a planetarium dome.

The transformation of ENSAT is an exciting event for our community. In his talk, Randy will explain how ORAS can become involved in the expanded goals of SCNC.

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.
NOTE: For the February meeting, go to the end of the road to Walker Hall.

**Warning about Parking:
Construction at ENSAT
has temporarily closed the parking lot.
The February 3 meeting
will be at Walker Hall.
Drive past the ENSAT building
to the end of the road.**

Upcoming Meetings

Dr. James Porter will talk about the ecology of war at the March 3 meeting. For details about location and parking, check the March newsletter and the ORAS website <http://www.oconeeriversaudubon.org/>

Due to commitments at UGA, **Dr. Samantha Joye** has had to postpone her talk on her experiences in the Gulf of Mexico and the oil spill. She has rescheduled to May 5.

Great Backyard Bird Count

<http://birds.audubon.org/great-backyard-bird-count>

The 14th annual Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) will be held from February 18 - 21, 2011. The GBBC is an annual four-day event that engages bird watchers of all ages in counting birds to create a real-time snapshot of where the birds are across the continent and in Hawaii. Please visit the official website at www.birdcount.org for more information.

Tentative Dates for Spring Bird Walks

- 3/19/2011 State Botanical Garden
- 3/26/2011 Sandy Creek Park - North Cook's Trail
- 4/02/2011 Sandy Creek Nature Center
- 4/09/2011 Whitehall Forest
- 4/16/2011 State Botanical Garden
- 4/23/2011 Sandy Creek Nature Center - Cook's Trail Cleanup
- 4/30/2011 Kennesaw Mountain
- 5/07/2011 USDA-AR

Aransas National Wildlife Refuge

by Liz Conroy

The December sun sank low over the Gulf Coast of Texas as we hiked through twisted live oaks and scrub. On our last day at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, we hoped to find one of the large alligators seen that day by other hikers. We both hurried around a bend in the trail.

Sure enough, a massive gator—pushing fourteen feet—rested on a bank in the last rays of the day and watched us indifferently. Several yards away another gator of similar size, but with a protruding belly, basked in the late sunshine, too. It looked like it had swallowed a tire. “Well, if one of the whoopers is missing,” said Mike Conroy, “I think that gator may be the reason.”

Aransas is home to a couple hundred Whooping Cranes—an endangered bird making a comeback from the brink of extinction. Fortunately, the numbers in this migratory flock have steadily increased. The flock flies 25,000 miles from Canada to Texas each winter and returns each spring. At five feet, the adult whooping crane (or whooper) is the tallest bird in North America with a wing span of more than seven feet.

At Wood Buffalo National Park, located in northeastern Alberta and southern Northwest Territories, each pair of whooping cranes typically produces two eggs. Often only one chick survives due to predation or siblicide. This reproductive pattern means that the long lived cranes reproduce slowly. Occasionally, two chicks survive and sometimes are referred to as “twins.”

We watched the stately, white adults with their black legs and black wing tips searching for blue crab and other prey in the brackish waters. We could clearly see their red crowns and black mustaches. Sometimes a juvenile, with patches of cinnamon-brown feathers amidst white plumage, accompanied its parents. The chicks are covered in cinnamon-brown down when they hatch, which helps them hide in marsh grasses from foxes and other predators.

No other family of whooping cranes hunted nearby. The adults are territorial and defend a wide swath of land for their own. A tall wooden tower at the refuge allows visitors to observe one mated pair. To view more whooping cranes, however, we rode with other sightseers in the “Skimmer.” This flat-bottomed boat—operated by experienced birder Captain Tommy—carried us along the edges of the refuge where we saw several different families of whooping cranes. Other birds viewed from the boat included: roseate spoonbills, great blue and little blue herons, white and brown pelicans, a harrier hawk, osprey, ibises, oystercatchers, curlews, egrets, loons, cormorants. Also, we saw ducks such as lesser scaup, buffleheads, pintails, and others. Porpoises played alongside the boat on occasion and added to the fun.

Earlier at the refuge, I traveled the 16 mile auto tour loop after spending time in the viewing tower. Along the edges of fields and woodlands, I saw many birds as well as deer and red squirrels. One unusual sight was a Great Egret struggling with a freshly caught catfish. The huge fish had a bulbous,

wide-mouthed head and large whiskers. Repeatedly, the egret flipped the catfish into the head first position and attempted to swallow it. But it could not get it down its throat and dropped it. After twenty minutes of observing this struggle, I needed to move on and hoped the egret was able to eat. Hopefully, all birds eat well at Aransas this winter. For the whooping cranes, a successful journey back to Canada requires stores of body fat. May this be a good year for all.

December Sightings Summary

by Richard Hall

105 species were recorded in Clarke County in December 2010, including an unusually high total of 18 waterfowl species. The lion’s share appeared on Lake Chapman following cold snaps, including the first of the year Common Goldeneye on 19th and Canvasback on 28th (the 200th and 201st species recorded in the county this year), new county high counts of Gadwall (5) and Hooded Merganser (19), and infrequently-seen species such as Bufflehead, Redhead and Lesser Scaup. Eagle-eyed Mirko Basen spotted an immature Snow Goose on the beach on 1st (followed by 24 more flying over) and a Greater Yellowlegs in the same spot on 7th. Other notable sightings were a Horned Grebe on 16th-17th, multiple Bonaparte’s Gulls and a county high count of 15 Ring-billed Gulls on 8th. Lake Herrick held a continuing Red-breasted Merganser until 5th, a Shoveler on 13th and an American Coot on 15th. Interesting passerines here included Black-and-White Warbler on 3rd, 2 Orange-crowned Warblers and a Common Yellowthroat throughout. The immature male Orchard Oriole was last seen on 4th. 9 Wild Turkeys were seen crossing the entrance road to Sandy Creek Nature Center on 11th, and Cook’s Trail yielded good counts of 6 American Black Ducks and 310 Rusty Blackbirds on 7th, and a county high count of 49 Golden-crowned Kinglets on 25th.

Good birding was also to be had in Clarke County farmlands. Following 2 Vesper Sparrows on 2nd, the fields adjacent to Coile Cemetery held 2 Common Ground-Doves and the county high count of Killdeer (73) the next day. A Red-winged Blackbird with an all-white tail was observed in a 2000-strong flock there on 13th. A Merlin was seen along Belmont Road on 6th and a Northern Harrier continued all month along Morton Road. The fields either side of S Milledge Avenue produced high counts of Eastern Meadowlark (80) on 1st and American Pipit (130) on 27th, and 2 American Kestrels and the Loggerhead Shrike were present throughout. In spite of poor weather, many good species were seen on the day of the Christmas Bird Count, including the 3 regular owl species and Common Snipe before dawn at the Golf Course Pond, and new county high point counts of American Woodcock (7, Botanical Garden) and House Finch (57, UGA Ecology building), but pride of place has to go to the unseasonal Dickcissel found by James Neves on private land in Oconee County. Finally, the cold weather made for good feeder-watching, with multiple backyard reports of Red-breasted Nuthatch, Pine Siskin, Purple Finch and Fox Sparrow.

eBird, Clarke County 2010

posted by Richard Hall

<http://www.quicktopic.com/29/H/6JbdZFsuhUc6>

A few interesting factoids about Clarke County 2010 from eBird: the total number of species verified as occurring in the county in 2010 currently stands at 201 species, compared with 178 for 2009 and 163 for 2008. The all-time eBird species total for Clarke now stands at 220, with 12 species added to the official eBird list in 2010:

- Snow Goose - Lake Chapman (25, 12/1)
- Greater Scaup - Lake Chapman (1, 11/28)
- Common Goldeneye - Lake Chapman (1, 12/19)
- Red-breasted Merganser - Lake Chapman (3, 11/28, 55, 11/30), Lake Herrick (1, 11/30-12/5)
- American Bittern - State Botanical Garden (1, 4/11-12)
- American Avocet - Lake Herrick (8, 9/27)
- Lesser Yellowlegs - Lake Herrick (3, 4/22; 2, 4/29)
- Semipalmated Sandpiper - Lake Herrick (1, 5/6; 4, 5/23; 1, 5/24; 2, 5/29)
- Pectoral Sandpiper - Lake Herrick (1, 3/31; 1, 5/6-7)
- Common Ground-Dove - S Milledge fields (1, 10/10), Coile Cemetery (2, 12/3)
- Rufous Hummingbird - Krista Gridley's backyard (1, 1/10-16)

The month-by-month species totals for 2010 (2009 totals in parentheses) are:

January **72** (72), February **76** (77), March **91** (82), April **150** (135), May **121** (118), June **76** (65), July **80** (83), August **89** (86), September **121** (96), October **136** (122), November **103** (87), December **105** (81)

Although there was a substantial increase in observer coverage at some spots, these figures may indicate that the spring and fall migration plus the second winter period were better for bird diversity than last year.

The 2010 (2009 in parentheses) species counts for the most heavily-birded Clarke County hotspots were:

- Lake Herrick **153** (112)
- Sandy Creek Park, Cook's Trail and Nature Center **165** (151)
- State Botanical Garden **151** (145)
- S Milledge Fields **106** (63)
- Whitehall Forest **100** (96)

My personal county birding highlights for 2010 were numerous: the wintering oddities (Rufous Hummingbird, Western Tanager, Orchard Oriole), the beautiful American Bittern at the BotGarden, a tame Barred Owl on my birthday, close-up views of shorebirds and swallows at Lake Herrick beach, singing Lincoln's Sparrow, Dickcissel and Bobolink on a sunny spring day, a Philly Vireo that sang and showed for all to admire on the first ORAS walk I led at the BotGarden, fall at the S Milledge fields bringing a bounty of sparrows, Common Ground-Dove plus my best-ever looks at Loggerhead Shrike and Sedge Wren, relocating Joel's skulking Mourning Warbler at the beaverpond (a long-awaited life bird), the tame backyard Eastern Phoebe that I

literally had eating out of my hands, lucky flyovers of White Ibis, Bald Eagle and Sandhill Cranes, Lake Chapman's waterfowl bonanza culminating with the immature Snow Goose on the beach, county bird no. 200 for Joel and I, and of course sharing many of these sightings with many wonderful folks on this listserv. My absolute favourite has to be the flock of American Avocets that graced Lake Herrick beach for a day.

Gorgeous birds, great looks, enjoyed by many birders through the day and proof once again that when it comes to birding, anything is possible - so get out and look!

Planning a Backyard Wildlife Habitat

by Robin Woodroof, Conservation Chair / Backyard Wildlife Sanctuary Program

You can attract wildlife to your yard by restoring its natural habitat and connect to nature in personal way. An attractive and productive wildlife habitat requires planning and winter is the perfect time to start.

Your habitat must provide essential elements of food, water, shelter, and places to raise young. Consider what types of wildlife are already attracted to your property and what types you want to attract. Keep in mind that wildlife is not attracted to a well-manicured lawn, but a natural one.

Think of your landscape as natural layers from trees to shrubs to groundcovers to soil. Different wildlife species live in one or more of these diverse layers, so many species can thrive in a small area. Start with what you know about the layers on your property. List the plants you already have and which essential element they provide. Include bird feeders, birdbaths, ponds, birdhouses and nest boxes already in place.

Once you know what you have, think about how you can enhance the habitat. Natural areas can be created around man-made structures such as your house, barn, walkways, and driveway. Avoid straight lines and perfect symmetry. Natural habitats tend to have curves and clumps of vegetation.

Consider leaving dead, dying, and hollow trees in your yard as well as logs and stumps unless they are a hazard as they provide homes to hundreds of wildlife. Think about removing invasive plants.

Plant a variety of trees, shrubs, vines, groundcovers and wildflowers. Evergreens provide year-round cover and shelter. Fruit and nut-bearing plants provide food. Flowering annuals and perennials add color and attract birds, butterflies, and bees. Native plants are well suited to our local soil, climate, and wildlife.

Your habitat will be a success if you have a plan that is right for you and the wildlife you want to attract. Remember that you are part of the habitat. Enjoy the process. Not everything has to be done at once. If money or time is limited, consider your habitat a work in progress.

Once you have a natural habitat started on your property, think about getting it certified as a backyard wildlife sanctuary.

January Meeting

summarized by Page Luttrell

At last month's meeting, Dr. Sonia Hernandez from Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources at UGA presented four of her research projects, all connected by a common theme: how human activities may affect the health of wild birds.

Her doctoral research in Costa Rica compared birds living in natural forests with those in shade tree and open sun coffee farms by examining the birds' coliform bacteria in relation to antibiotic resistance.

Another project assessed the prevalence of *Salmonella* bacteria in wild birds at backyard feeders and how different feeding practices can affect disease transmission.

Dr. Hernandez also discussed a preliminary study on the change of some White Ibis in Florida from natural habitats to urban areas for feeding and whether this may increase their exposure to infectious diseases.

Her fourth study is concerned with how free-ranging cats (owned and feral) impact wild populations of birds, small mammals, reptiles and amphibians through predation, harassment, and disturbance. She and her graduate student are attaching small "kitty-cams" to cats volunteered by their owners to document exactly what impacts they may have on the neighborhood fauna.

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