



The Mountain Warbler

Newsletter of the Highlands Plateau Audubon Society – February 2015

Cashiers – Franklin – Highlands – Scaly Mountain

www.highlandsaudubonsociety.org

The mission of the Highlands Plateau Audubon Society is to provide opportunities to enjoy and learn about birds and other wildlife and to promote conservation and restoration of the habitats that support them.

From the President . . .

Lost souls, pioneers responding to climate change, or just mistaken identities?

I suspect that woodland thrushes rank very high among people's favorite NC birds. The Wood Thrush and Veery are of course iconic Southern Appalachian avian summer residents up until they risk perilous migrations to spend their winters in South America. I've never been able to decide which of these two species' spectacular and haunting vocalization I like better; the free-form flute of the Wood Thrush or the complex, cosmic sound of the Veery's 'space ship coming in to land.' These birds fall into the 'heard more often than seen' category, but how lovely and distinctive are their virtuoso vocal performances! On a summer's evening I sit at the top of our meadow and listen to the thrushes in the surrounding woods and creek bottom call and respond to each other late into the evening...the bats are typically already silhouetted against the sky and the thrushes are still in concert. May it ever be thus!

Their winter counterpart in our area is of course the Hermit Thrush, a species that undergoes what I hope is a slightly less perilous fall migration to our area from further north on the same continent. Sadly, there is no cause for avian singing in the dead of winter, even for a thrush. The Hermit Thrush's distinctive tail flicking behavior helps make them relatively easy to differentiate from their sibling species regardless of time of year...although when it is really cold even Hermit Thrush tail flicking seems to be a little subdued. The density of winter Hermit Thrushes in our area is probably not high but they are here and, for example, one recently made an appearance on our chapter's December Christmas Bird Count. I see them more regularly when I travel to more southerly winter forests (e.g., GA).

One of my favorite anecdotes regarding a Hermit Thrush has to do with raking the leaves off our driveway in early winter, before the threat of the ground freezing but well after fall migration was over. As I was noisily raking my way up the drive, I looked around to see a Hermit Thrush following closely along behind me, chowing down on the invertebrates that I had so nicely exposed for his consumption. I imagined that this bird might have come to associate the noise and human behavior of leaf raking as a harbinger of an easy dinner; pretty smart! It made me wonder what other, possibly suburban, Yankee lifestyle tricks did this bird know that might contribute to his/her winter survival?

All of the various North American woodland thrushes (e.g., Wood, Veery, Hermit, Swainson's, Grey Cheeked) look a lot alike to most of us, especially when you run across a thrush in dense understory that isn't singing distinctive songs and isn't flicking his tail in the exaggerated Hermit Thrush salute. So I found considerable solace years ago when I read in one of the field guides that, in the winter, the Hermit Thrush is our only resident woodland thrush. That tidbit really helped simplify my expectations for winter thrush identification; all the other woodland thrushes that have survived their migration should then be in South America!

I have a free email subscription to the North Carolina Rare Bird Alert listing (<http://ebird.org/ebird/alerts>). No, I'm not an ambulance chasing birdo, but I do find it interesting to vicariously hear about what unusual birds are being reported in our region. A couple of rare bird alerts have recently caught my eye: two, presumably different, Wood Thrushes were reported in New Hanover and Person counties in the first week of January...dead of winter! An affront to the highly valued one-winter-woodland-thrush doctrine! They should have been in Brazil months ago! So what are the possible explanations and implications of such sightings?

There is the school of thinking that migratory birds that are found far from their expected ranges may be 'navigationally challenged;' lost avian souls that are most often doomed by some ecologic incompatibility (e.g. extreme cold, absence of suitable food). Slight malfunctions in what must be extremely complex avian sensory or behavior patterns that are essential to normal, often epic, migrations are not hard to imagine.



Wood thrush by Will Stuart
future. I like to think that.

However, there may be other, evolutionarily significant, ways to think about these seasonal outliers. As everyone knows, Wood Thrushes are a poster child for the hazards of migration; e.g., collision with windows, habitat deterioration here and on the wintering grounds, to say nothing of flying thousands of miles, both ways, mostly at night, and often over the ocean! If their cousins the Hermit Thrushes can survive in chillier climates over the winter, perhaps these reported Wood Thrushes are pioneers, taking a chance on experimenting with a winter lifestyle that doesn't include some of the incredible hazards of modern intercontinental migration. And if the National Audubon predictions for changes in 'climate space' and bird distribution are validated as rapidly as forecast, our lost soul Wood Thrush of today, who 'presses the envelope' of traditional distributions and migration patterns, may be a great great grandparent of Wood Thrushes that our grandchildren will hopefully know and appreciate. Perhaps these lost Wood Thrushes are really the potential saviors for the species. Perhaps they are helping do their evolutionary part to "save the songs" for our summertime forests. Perhaps these very birds are talismans of hope for the

Lost souls, evolutionary pioneers, migration, climate change, and hopeful thoughts for the future all put aside, the cynic also needs to know just how secure are we with regard to the validation of rare human sightings of two hard to identify midwinter Wood Thrushes in N.C.? Without a very good photo, it is hard to convince the cynical intermediate birder, who is rather desperately clinging to his one-winter-woodland thrush doctrine!

Russell Regnery

Save the date: Audubon Convention, July 12-13, 2015

Prepare to join Audubon's amazing network of dedicated chapter, centers, state and national leaders to celebrate One Audubon! The next biennial Audubon Convention will take place at the Lansdowne Resort on the banks of the Potomac River, near historic Leesburg, Virginia on July 10-13, 2015. Enjoy four full days of exciting field trips, inspiring speakers, in-depth hands-on workshops and the camaraderie only Audubon can provide. Registration and lodging details will be available soon.

To receive email alerts when the Convention website launches and when registration opens, send an email to convention@audubon.org titled "Convention Alerts" and include your email address, first and last name in the body of the message.

For general conference inquiries and questions or sponsorship opportunities contact Lynn Tennefoss at ltennefoss@audubon.org or call (800) 542-2748.

Kelsey Hutchinson Park progressing

The Kelsey Hutchinson Founders Park Coalition had a productive meeting on January 8th. It was our first post holiday get-together and our first opportunity to review preliminary plans for the inclusion of what we are now calling Phase 2. This is the now-leveled, former Sossomon property on Oak and Pine Street Alleys.

Recently cleared by Billy Hawkins, it is now serving as a staging area for construction materials. Our landscape architect, Hank Ross, has devised a beautiful plan to optimize this property and to enhance flow from the present park. More hardscape than the Phase 1 site, this tentative plan will provide both summer and winter appeal. Again, thanks to Art and Angela Williams' continued philanthropy, and that of an anonymous donor, we are hitting the ground running.



Kelsey Hutchinson Park

Highlands is becoming, increasingly, a year round destination, and we plan to make this park a focus for

people and wildlife, and I expect the birds and plantings to draw even more people.

We are extremely pleased with the progress Schmitt Builders is making with the new pavilion and restroom structures on the Phase 1 site. They will be improvements of which we can all be proud.

Our group is developing additional naming opportunities to acknowledge the generosity of present and future donors.

Bill Peavey

Nest Box Project at Highlands Falls Country Club



Highlands Falls Country Club is partnering with Highlands Plateau Audubon Society on a communitywide experiment to determine if offering identical bird boxes but with larger and smaller diameter entrance holes, may increase nesting success for native bird species in our area.

Seven pairs of boxes have been placed throughout the golf course and will be monitored throughout the year to see which size entrance hole will be more successful. Results will be shared with the N.C. Audubon Society. Some cavity nesting birds that we hope to attract are the Eastern Bluebird, Carolina Chickadee, Tree Swallow, and Carolina Wren.

Workers installing a nest box

Since the ecology and environment at HFCC is just as important to the beauty of the golf course as perfectly mown grass, this project will only enhance the allure of the property.

Note: HPAS members living at other area clubs may want to share this opportunity with their golf course supervisors or other appropriate staff. More boxes will be available for placement later this year.

*Fred Gehrish
HFCC Superintendent*

Dauphin Island trip full, spring birding in Atlanta awaits

The Dauphin Island trip is full and has a wait list, but members will still have a chance to do some early spring birding for migrants on our Kennesaw Mountain trip in April, overnighting in Atlanta on April 18th, with birding on April 19th. The Atlanta Audubon Society says: “Kennesaw Mountain National Battlefield Park has excellent birding habitat, but is best known as a rich migrant stopover. It is the best Atlanta location for observing fall raptor migration movements. Additionally, the tree lines up and down the paved road to the summit can yield an exciting passerine display, especially during migration. This is one of the best spots east of the Mississippi to see a migrating Cerulean Warbler.”

Join HPAS for an overnight trip to the Atlanta area to bird this spring migrant trap and get an early fix on our returning Highlands birds. We plan to rendezvous on Saturday, April 18th, arriving by 5 p.m. to stay at the Hampton Inn Atlanta Town Center – Kennesaw.

Anyone interested should contact Romney at 828-526-1939 or croftess@frontier.com

HPAS field trips

Watch our HPAS website and April newsletter for May schedule of walks. The first walk of the year will be a Beginner’s Walk with Russ Regnery, carpooling from the Highlands Town Hall parking lot to the Highlands Botanical Garden. The walk, on May 2, will start at 8:30 a.m., later than usual in hopes of attracting some who may be new to birding and prefer to sleep in a bit!

Call Romney Bathurst with questions, 828-526-1939. Binoculars and field guides will be furnished.

Romney Bathurst

HPAS Transitions

The HPAS Board of Directors is excited to note some crucial changes in key chapter responsibilities.

Michelle Styring has for three years served as Publicity person, coordinating communicating with the various local news outlets that provide publicity for HPAS activities. Michelle is stepping away from this role but will remain on the Communications Committee and HPAS board of directors. Michelle has taken a lead role in organizing the chapter's recently launched "Big Bird Box Experiment" (which has been discussed in previous newsletters). Michelle excelled at reaching out to the various news outlets in a timely manner that coincided with deadlines. Avary Doubleday, Chairperson of the Communications Committee said, "Michelle has taken our publicity effort to a new level. Her organization skills, personal contact with newspaper editors and reporters, and attention to detail have brought us the best coverage we have ever had." HPAS's current high level of visibility within the communities of the Highlands Plateau and beyond can be credited to Michelle. We thank her sincerely for her efforts.

William McReynolds has graciously stepped forward to assume the responsibilities of HPAS publicity, under the umbrella of the HPAS Communications Committee. William's enthusiasm, wit, writing ability, and good spirits will serve him well in his new role within the Chapter, and I know everyone involved with HPAS activities very much appreciates William's willingness to contribute to the HPAS, and we look forward to working with him.

Don Shure has worn several hats during his continuing tenure with the HPAS and the Highlands Plateau community in general. Notably, Don is one of the longest standing Trustees of the Highlands Biological Foundation where his commitment to the importance of Highlands Biological Station to the community has dovetailed well with his personal and professional interest in the ecology of the Southern Appalachians.

Don was President of HPAS for four years (2007-2011), which was a pivotal time as HPAS underwent significant, self-imposed restructuring and obtained 501(c)(3) status as a non-profit organization. It was also during Don's term as HPAS President that HPAS hosted the 2010 statewide Audubon North Carolina Annual Meeting of all ten state chapters at The Mountain. This event has been held up as a model for subsequent statewide meetings ever since.

As Chairperson of the HPAS Leadership and Development Committee, many of us can attest to Don's powers of persuasion in recruiting HPAS members to contribute to the viability of a small chapter with limited available human resources. And of course Don has almost single-handedly organized the evening summer HPAS lecture series as Chairperson of the HPAS Programs Committee. Don's ability to identify and recruit excellent speakers has enriched the intellectual atmosphere of our community as well as frequently challenging our imaginations. Don's programs have always been noteworthy as frequently more than simply an evening's entertainment. It is this important 'hat' as Programs Chairperson that Don is now passing off to another generation of Programs Committee leadership, although Don will continue to be an active participant of the Programs Committee and the HPAS Board of Directors. We all owe Don our sincere thanks for all the hats he has worn, and still wears, as part of HPAS and we anticipate his significant contributions to the Chapter in the future.

Bill Peavey, a well known and respected resident of the Highlands Plateau and an active HPAS member, has stepped forward to assume the important role of Programs Chairperson for the Chapter and he has indicated he will accept a nomination to serve on the HPAS Board of Directors. Bill serves as HPAS representative on the Kelsey-Hutchinson Park committee. Bill and his wife Sheila will be representing HPAS this summer at National Audubon's Hog Island program on Hog Island, Maine. Don Shure observed, "Bill emerged as the top candidate for this position through his dedicated participation at Audubon events and the keen insight he demonstrated at Program functions. He will do an excellent job!" We eagerly look forward to Bill's future contributions to the Chapter and to providing him all the support we can along the way.

As an 'editorial note,' I will mention that it should go without saying that volunteers stepping forward to accept new roles within a volunteer organization, such as HPAS, are central to the survival of the organization, just as it should be expected that active volunteers may also move on. It cannot be taken for granted that any Audubon chapter has an indefinite life span without an ongoing and healthy turnover in membership participation. Our chapter only exists as members contribute their time and effort to make it work. We are all volunteers, not paid staff, and as current President of HPAS, I'd like to take this opportunity to re-welcome all of our members into the HPAS fold and offer a special thanks to those of you who contribute to make the chapter special.

P.S. We are still looking for a good person or persons to help lead our Membership Committee!

Russell Regnery

Christmas Bird Count



Pair of Mergansers by William McReynolds

Birds count. That is why some people count birds. In the early morning gloaming on Thursday, December 18, twelve hardy and conservation-minded members of the Highlands Plateau Audubon Society gathered on Mirror Lake near Highlands to inventory our winter avian residents. Teams of binocular-wielders set out under the leadership of their most experienced birders. One team went west to the Turtle Pond area. Another team went south to Horse Cove and Rich Gap. Those north and easterly bound did their spotting at Flat Mountain, Chestnut Hill, Cold Spring and Cheney Lane. A fourth group surveyed areas in and immediately around town, including Sunset Rocks, the Highlands Biological Station and the town's water treatment facility. The clear, brisk day sparkled with beauty and promise.

This annual Christmas Bird Count is the largest and most important citizen science project conducted by the National Audubon Society in the U.S. and the Bird Studies group in Canada. This year is the 115th year the count has been taken. The CBC database has been central to the recent Audubon Birds and Climate Report available at <http://climate.audubon.org/article/audubon-report-glance/>.

What are we seeing locally and nationally? Unfortunately, the trend is downward both locally and nationwide and the lovely weather enjoyed by all could not reverse that trend. The total number of species seen here this year was down by 2 to 41 and the total number of birds seen decreased by 99, to 977. Our birds are not thriving. Indeed, the Audubon Birds and Climate Report indicates that 314 bird species in North America are at risk, 126 of those species being climate endangered.

Some of the bird-watchers' delights this year were a large flock (dare we say a murmuration) of Pine Siskins, five species of woodpeckers including the impressive Pileated and two Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, a Hermit Thrush, 25 Hooded Merganser and a Ruby-crowned Kinglet. Two of the teams enjoyed excellent views of Golden-crowned Kinglets, with males flashing their golden-edged, scarlet crowns.

It was a truly fun and rewarding morning for all, capped with bowls of hot chili and fresh cornbread provided by Edwin and Kay Poole. Hopefully more hardy souls will join in next year. This is citizen science at its best and all are invited to join in. Watch for announcements of all local Audubon outings on the HPAS website at www.highlandsaudubonsociety.org/.

William McReynolds



Local Audubon bird counters--Left to right back: Romney Bathurst, Kay Poole, Russ Regnery; Left to right seated: Janice Shure, Don Shure, Pat Strickland, Edwin Poole; Foreground: Kyle Pursel (L) and Mike Kaiser (Photo by William McReynolds) Missing: Jack Johnston, Cynthia Strain and Sarah Pursel

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