



The Mountain Warbler

Newsletter of the Highlands Plateau Audubon Society – October 2013

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: One Size Does Not Fit All

As a mountain Audubon chapter we face challenges as well as interesting advantages. One of the obvious challenges is being able to readily travel between communities (e.g., Franklin, Cashiers, Highlands), as our comrades on more level ground do regularly when participating in programs or bird outings some distance away. Occasionally, challenges are manifest in how we can best respond to statewide Audubon initiatives that may not specifically apply to our mountain ecology.

Audubon North Carolina is encouraging chapter participation in an exciting program to substantially enhance the reproductive potential of the Brown-headed Nuthatch (BHNU) in our state. The BHNU is an iconic, tiny, and very cute bird found only in the SE. They nest in cavities which they either construct themselves in rotten wood (they are not particularly good excavators) or in found cavities. Like most birds that depend on cavities for nesting, the BHNU is in serious decline throughout its home range in the southeastern U.S. Dr. Mark Stanback (Davidson College) discussed this dilemma at one of this summer's HPAS programs and he also documented how something as simple as the size of the hole in a nest box can impact BHNU nesting success. A smaller than 'normal' nest box hole (e.g., 1" instead of 1.5") permits BHNU to use nest boxes but excludes larger and perhaps more aggressive competitors for the same cavities (e.g., Eastern Bluebirds and House Sparrows). Early results from Dr. Stanback's studies show that within the appropriate habitat, an impressive 85% of 100 nest boxes installed with 1" holes were occupied by nesting BHNU within the first few months of installation! Based on this information Audubon North Carolina has set out on the ambitious goal to install 10,000 new BHNU nest boxes in NC!

It is important to emphasize that nesting cavities are not only a limiting resource for BHNU; it is thought that suitable nesting cavities can be a limiting factor in the survival of several species of cavity nesting birds, which range in size from the diminutive BHNU all the way up to much larger Wood Ducks and Barn Owls. Hence, the basic challenge is much larger than BHNU's alone. The bigger issue is an insufficient, diverse 'housing market' for a variety of cavity nesting species.

The geographic range of the BHNU corresponds to that of the historic long-leaf pine forests that of course occurred primarily at elevations below 2000 feet, and hence the BHNU is rarely seen in the highlands. We know that BHNU occur near Franklin and HPAS member and Director, George Kaye has already installed nest boxes suitable for BHNU along the Little Tennessee River. What else can we do at higher altitudes, since it might be pointless to put up boxes for a tiny bird that doesn't exist in the highlands? Do we have other birds which would benefit from a 1 inch or slightly larger diameter nest hole? We do have another slightly larger nut

nuthatch, the Red-breasted Nuthatch, whose range extends as far south as the southern highlands, and which might similarly benefit from access to boxes with appropriately sized (perhaps 1.25") diameter entrances too. And of course we also have the larger still White-breasted Nuthatches, as well as Titmice, Chickadees, Wrens, Eastern Bluebirds, Screech Owls, and Kestrels, which also require suitable nesting cavities (to say nothing of flying squirrels and their mammalian friends).

So, as a chapter, HPAS is considering embarking on our own locally focused program to experiment with a variety of nest box entrance sizes and then document which species are encouraged, or are excluded, from the various boxes. We hope the information that we learn will be both interesting and useful for the survival of a variety of cavity nesting species. The early reports from Dr. Stanback's studies with BHNU success, in addition to the well-known success of the return of the Eastern Bluebird, suggests that optimizing nest box hole diameters should be fruitful. Our local initiative will be one HPAS contribution towards helping cavity nesting avian species in general. We hope that within the next couple of years, many HPAS members will help participate in this experiment with an array of nest boxes, designed to benefit a variety of local cavity nesting species. This challenge should be fun for us and beneficial to our local avian species!

Russ

Christmas Bird Count

Join us for the Christmas Bird Count in Highlands on December 19th. We will meet at the home of Kay and Edwin Poole at 7:30 in the morning, divide into teams and search for birds in the area until about noon or 1 PM. We will meet again at the Poole's for lunch to share stories and total the number of birds we found. This count is part of a national effort which has a 100 year history. The data about birds we collect will be added to a National data base which can help scientists learn more about birds. If you are interested in participating, please contact Brock Hutchins at 828-787-1387.

Who's Blogging?

Audubon NC has invited chapters to participate in its blog, <http://ncaudubonblog.org>. The plan is to feature one chapter each month. Cape Fear Audubon was featured in September and Wake Audubon will be in the spotlight in October. Start following the blog now as HPAS will be featured next April. If you want to share something, let us know! The Franklin Bird Club blogs at <http://franklinbcb.wordpress.com>. Be sure to follow reports on their bird walks and programs.

Should HPAS have a blog to share bird alerts, our field trips, and programs? Would you be willing to help coordinate such a venture? If so, contact Avary at avaryd@juno.com

Education News

During this season HPAS sponsored and collaborated with several community endeavors for advancing environmental education.

- provided instructors at Highlands Middle School for classes on microbiology and the interrelationships of all living things for eight grade students
- provided a CLE class by Romney Bathurst entitled “Birding Beyond Our Borders”
- applied for an IBA Collaborative Funding Agreement from National Audubon which was awarded to The Highlands School for their Middle School Courtyard Classroom Project for native plants and installation of two bird nesting boxes
- provided nature activities for the Blue Ridge School summer reading camp
- provided the MC (Russ) for Mountain Wildlife Days in Sapphire Valley as well as an exhibit booth
- participated in the planting of Chestnut trees in the Cashiers McKinney Meadow
- partnered with the Cashiers Historical Society for the Founder’s Day event

Check out our website under Community Involvement for photos and contact me if you are interested in sharing ideas or participating in events like these in the future. anncampbell48@hotmail.com

Native Plants, Native Birds

Most of us are already aware of the important relationship between native plant species and healthy populations of native bird species (see Doug Tallamy’s *Bringing Nature Home*). And thanks to dedicated ‘plant people’ we already have suggested lists of native plant species suitable for use in gardens in our area. In the near future we hope to use existing resources and expertise in developing more specific information relating to native plants recognized to be especially beneficial to native birds in our mountain gardens. Similar information that has already been developed by other Audubon NC chapters for the Carolina Coastal Plain and will soon be developed for the Piedmont region. This kind of bird friendly information has been used successfully to influence official plant lists used by municipal and local governments for public landscaping projects in the Wilmington, NC, area and we hope this can occur in our mountain communities as well. Merging native plant and native bird interests is a ‘win-win’.

Kim Brand Speaks at Highlands Native Plant Conference

Ms. Kimberly Brand, ANC Trustee, Vice President of Forsyth Audubon Chapter, and recently announced Together Green Fellow, spoke to those gathered together for the 13th annual Highlands Native Plant Symposium, September 14, at the PAC. Kim’s talk, “Bird-Friendly Landscaping: How You Can Help Birds” did an excellent job of helping emphasize the importance of choices we make in our gardens and homes with regards to the providing safe, productive habitat for birds.

2013 Members of Highlands Plateau Audubon Society

Special thanks to all our Local Chapter members. Your generous support of our growing organization has provided funding for expanded activities in our mountain community. The list reflects payments received through September 17, 2013.

If you do not see your name in the list then our records indicate we have not received your dues for this year.

Contact Pat Strickland if you think there is an error (828-743-7421)

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Mountain Audubon Chapter Rendezvous and HPAS Annual Retreat

The Great Smoky Mountains Audubon Chapter will host an informal gathering of representatives from three of the four mountain chapters of Audubon NC at Cataloochee Ranch on September 28 for a one day gathering to discuss issues of common interest to our organizations. As alluded to in the Presidents message (see page 1) our mountain chapters share certain challenges often associated with geography and the inherently small communities that typify our region. This occasional, regional get together is an attempt to review ‘what has worked’, and what hasn’t, for our sister chapters and discuss ways our chapters may be able to work together and prevent possible overlap of efforts.

On October 22, HPAS Directors will get together to spend a day at The Mountain to review the 2013 seasonal chapter activities, and to begin strategic planning for 2014. Heather Stark, Director of Audubon North Carolina, will participate in the program review. HPAS can be proud of our existing organization and accomplishments; however, we of course need to continue to carefully plan for the future to maintain and improve upon the level of community involvement that we have achieved. If you have something you think we should consider, let Russ know: russellregnery@mac.com .

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