

THE Lesser SQUAWK

The Charleston Audubon Society
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YEARS OF
CONSERVATION

The Charleston Audubon Society – a SC chapter of the National Audubon Society since 1970, founded as the Charleston Natural History Society in 1905, and serving Berkeley, Charleston and Dorchester counties – is a nonprofit environmental organization that actively promotes awareness, appreciation and conservation of the natural environment through educational programs, field trips, conservation projects, sponsored research and social activities.

Winter Hummingbirds

For many years, ornithologists believed ruby-throated hummingbirds were the only hummers found east of the Mississippi River. But Gary Phillips and other bird banders have discovered that a number of western species—including rufous, black-chinned, and calliope hummingbirds—regularly spend the winter in South Carolina and other southeastern states.

If you leave your hummingbird feeder up during the winter, there's a chance you will attract one of these rarities. And you will also be helping researchers learn more about these birds. Last April, Gary spoke to our chapter about his work with winter hummingbirds. He is continuing his study this year and would like you to get in touch with him if you see a hummer in your yard anytime between now and March 1. With your permission, he will come to your house and band the bird.

Gary recommends hanging your hummingbird feeder where you can see it easily. Be sure to keep it clean. (When the weather is cold, the sugar water should be changed every two weeks.) If you notice the nectar level going down, watch the feeder early in the morning or late in the day to see if you have a hummer.

You can reach Gary at (843) 833-8748 or email him at carolinensis@yahoo.com or gary_m_phillips@fws.gov.

— CONTINUED from page 3, Dogs on the Beach

35-40% of their body weight in fat; birds that do not put on enough weight during the winter are less likely to survive migration. While habitat loss is clearly a problem, so is disturbance on the wintering grounds: many small disturbances over the course of each day result in less time for feeding, and thus lighter birds who are less likely to survive migration.

While it may be difficult to imagine the brief disturbance caused by one dog on the beach impacting an entire population, the cumulative impact of repeated disturbances is clear. Given declining populations of shorebirds and the critical role that beaches in S.C. play in supporting these populations, we should clearly be concerned about the likely impacts that dogs off-leash during the winter months would have on our local, wintering shorebirds. And if they know these facts, local dog owners are more likely agree with us and be willing to leash their dogs on the beach.



New Members, Renewals, Gift Memberships

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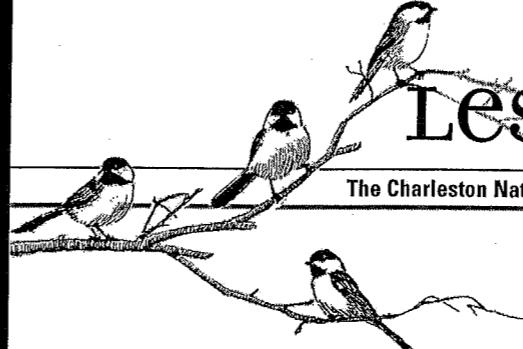
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Charleston Audubon Society



The Charleston Natural History Society, Celebrating 100 Years, 1905-2005

January 2005 • Vol. LI • No. 4

Lecture Series at County Library

Our lecture series is being held in the second floor auditorium of the main branch of the Charleston County Library, 68 Calhoun Street in Charleston. Lectures are free, and open to all Audubon members, guests and to the general public. We gather at 6:30 p.m. for a reception and speakers will begin their programs at 7:00 p.m.

The American Oystercatcher in South Carolina's Cape Romain

Wednesday, January 12, 2005

Felicia Sanders, South Carolina Department of Natural Resources Wildlife Biologist at the Santee Coastal Reserve, will discuss the breeding biology and winter foraging habits of the largest concentration of American oystercatchers on the Atlantic coast located in the Cape Romain Region.

Stretching for 22 miles along the coast of South Carolina, Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge is a rich and beautiful natural resource managed by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. The Refuge was established in 1932 as migratory bird refuge. Birders can observe peak waterfowl numbers in late November or early December. At this time most of the Atlantic Coast's oyster-catcher population is on the refuge.

The eastern race of the American oystercatcher has been identified as an "extremely high priority" shorebird by the Working Group for the Southeastern Coastal Plain as part of the U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan. Results of a SCNR survey in 2001 suggest a 21% decline in oystercatchers in the Cape Romain Region over 14 years.

Song and the Secret Lives of Sparrows

Wednesday, February 9, 2005

Why do birds sing? How does song help them decide where to live, with whom to mate? How do individual differences in behavior (what, in people, we would call "personality") affect their lives?

College of Charleston assistant professor Melissa Hughes has been studying a banded population of Song Sparrows for 7 years. She knows the birds as individuals: what songs they sing, how long they have lived, and their successes and failures as mates and parents. This sparrow soap opera reveals surprising complexity in the lives of these little brown birds.

Help Promote Our Society at SEWE

After a long hiatus, our Society has decided to participate again at this year's Southeastern Wildlife Exposition (February 18-20, 2005). We will be offering information on the Society and its activities (lectures, field trips, conservation, stewardship of the McAlhany and Wannamaker properties, etc.) and are hoping to increase awareness of and build membership in the Society. In order to do this we need your help!

We need volunteers to answer questions and hand out literature at our table for half-day shifts (about 4 hours, either 10 a.m.-2 p.m. or 2-6 p.m.). If you've attended a lecture that you really enjoyed, or been on a memorable field trip, share that experience with your Charleston neighbors (and yes, a few folks from out of town, too)! Contact Andy Harrison by phone at 795-6934 or email at parula23@aol.com if you think you'd like to volunteer.



MARK YOUR CALENDARS:

Upcoming Programs, Outings & Lowcountry Events

The 105th Audubon CBC The Race is on to Break 2000 Counts in One Season

During last season's highly successful and eventful 104th Christmas Bird Count, a record total of 1996 counts was included in the online database. Redpolls flooded southward across the continent, favorable weather graced participants in many regions, and the post-season focus of analysis was on Boreal Species. If recent trends continue we can hope to break the 2000-count mark during the 105th Christmas Bird Count.

The full report of the Scientific Peer Review panel has been published in the 104th Christmas Bird Count issue of *American Birds*, and the course for future improvements in the Count has been charted. Conservation, scientific, and birding communities embrace CBC data for their value for long-term analyses and general interest. With the continuing improvements to data output, the heralded efforts of all Christmas Bird Count compilers and participants will be of even more value to the birds we're all counting!

Remember you can send-in photographs taken on your CBC. During each CBC season many participants and compilers are able to photograph or otherwise document birds found on their counts. Many of those photos are of rarities, while others are of interesting occurrences on a given count. We're pleased to highlight here a sample of the photos submitted in past seasons for use in the Christmas Bird Count issues of *American Birds*.

Learn more online: www.audubon.org/bird/cbc.

■ Thursday, Dec. 30 – Litchfield-Pawleys Isl. CBC

The Litchfield-Pawleys Island CBC is on Thursday, December 30, 2004. Jack Peachy is the compiler; phone: 843-3475810, email ppaw@sccost.net. This count circle encompasses; Huntington Beach State Park, Brookgreen Gardens, Murrells Inlet, Plantations west of the Waccamaw river and Sandy Island.

■ Saturday, Jan. 1, 2005 – Santee NWR CBC

The Santee NWR CBC is on Saturday, January 1, 2005. Lex Glover is the compiler; phone: 803-438-9855, email bjlvr@clemson.edu. The Santee count covers the wildlife refuge, Santee State Park, Vance and areas adjacent to the refuge.

■ Sunday, Jan. 2, 2005 – Charleston CBC

The Charleston CBC is on Sunday, January 2, 2005. Burton Moore is the compiler; daytime

phone: 853-1100, email BEMIII@yahoo.com. Participants will meet at 7:00 a.m. at the KFC/Gas station complex at the corner of Hwy 41 and US-17 just north of Mt. Pleasant.

■ Saturday, Jan. 22 – Edisto Beach State Park

Join Andy Harrison for a day of shell collecting and fossil hunting at Edisto Beach State Park. (We may also see a bird or two!)

Edisto Beach is well known as a good spot for finding shells and Pleistocene fossils, including sharks teeth. In addition to its 1.5 miles of beach, the park also offers some dense maritime forest and expanses of salt marsh habitat.

There is a fee charged for admission to the park (\$4 adults; \$2.50 seniors; \$1.50 children aged 6-15; free for kids 5 and under). Meet Andy at 9 a.m. in the Food Lion parking lot in Ravenel. Bring something to hold your finds (plastic bag, bucket, etc.), binoculars, field guides, water/food/snacks, and sunscreen/insect repellent. Good shoes and warm clothing are recommended.

Register with Andy at 795-6934 or by email at parula23@aol.com by Friday, January 21.

■ 2005 Backyard Bird Count – Feb. 18-21

During the weekend of February 18 through 21, people across the North American continent are encouraged to count the birds in their backyards and report them over the Internet, as part of the Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC), one of the world's largest volunteer efforts of its kind. In addition to its value as a research study, the GBBC allows people of all ages and backgrounds to celebrate birds and provide vital information about North America's birds.

This year's theme, "North America's Great Backyard," was chosen as a way to celebrate the beauty of birds found across the continent. People are encouraged to enjoy the birds around them by going out into the "Great Backyard" during any or all of the count days and keeping track of the highest numbers of each bird species they see.

"Taking part in the Great Backyard Bird Count takes as little or as much time as participants wish," says Audubon's director of citizen science Paul Green. "The important thing is to just take part, count for the birds, and enjoy North America's Great Backyard."

Instructions for participating can be found at www.birdsource.org/gbbc. There's no fee or registration. Those who would like to participate but who aren't online can try their local library, and many Wild Birds Unlimited store owners who are online will be accepting observations made by their customers.

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Blackbird, Don't Fly Away!

by Conservation Chair Andy Harrison

The National Audubon Society included a summary of its "State of the Birds USA 2004" in the October issue of *Audubon* magazine. The findings reported in this study were alarming: a large number of the 654 bird species native to the continental United States are in trouble. 70.4% of grassland species, 35.9% of shrubland species, 25.6% of woodland species, 13.2% of water species, and even 23.3% of urban species have undergone significant declines in population from 1966-2003 (based on national Breeding Bird Survey [BBS] data, and supported by Audubon Christmas Bird Count observations). The principal factors contributing to these declines are the loss and degradation of habitat. Go to www.audubon.org/bird/stateofthebirds for the complete report.

More startling to me than the above numbers, though, was the list of birds that have experienced the steepest declines in population over the past four decades. Data for these 16 species came from large sample sets (at least 95 BBS routes were included in the analysis of each species). I expected to see Cerulean Warbler (-79.6%) on this list, but Field Sparrow (-68.8%) came as a surprise. Topping the chart with an incredible 97.9% plunge in numbers was Rusty Blackbird. Neither Field Sparrow nor Rusty Blackbird is in imminent danger of extinction – the 2003 population estimates given in the report for the two species are 8.2 million and 2.0 million birds, respectively. But if you do the math, less than 40 years ago there were probably more than 95 million Rusty Blackbirds in this country.

Rusty Blackbirds breed in the remote, far northern part of the continent and winter in wet forests of the East Coast and Midwest. In South Carolina Bird Life, Sprunt and Chamberlain (1949) described the species as a common winter resident in SC. I became curious about what I might learn if I examined the historic data available online (at www.audubon.org/bird/cbc) for Rusty Blackbird observations on Christmas Bird Counts in SC. Until 1950 or so, the numbers reported were small – but so were the number of

Fight the Opening of ANWR

With a stronger Republican majority in the U.S. Senate, it is likely that those who support the opening of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) to drilling for oil will be successful when such a proposal comes to a vote early next year – and it will probably be attached to an omnibus budget bill that will be impossible to filibuster. A pro-drilling bill has already passed in the House of Representatives. Despite the odds, we still need to let our Senators know that a majority of Americans oppose this plan.

ANWR is the one of the last pristine wilderness areas in the U.S. and the only conservation unit that protects the complete spectrum of arctic ecosystems in North America. The proposed drilling area is small relative to the full size of the refuge, but it is one of the most biologically productive areas in ANWR and a center of wildlife activity. By raising fuel economy standards or encouraging consumers to purchase gas-electric hybrid

vehicles, we could save much more oil than could possibly be extracted from this unspoiled gem.

Please call or e-mail our two Senators from SC and let them know you oppose such short-sighted energy policy. Contact information for Lindsey Graham is available at www.senate.gov, while to reach newly-elected Jim DeMint you should access www.house.gov.

counts (often three or less) and total observers (which didn't exceed 10 until 1938). From 1950 to 1960, the number of Rusty Blackbirds reported in SC climbed from the hundreds to the thousands, and it reached a peak of more than 300,000 birds in 1960 (8 counts with 79 total observers). This was an unusually high number, as the total dropped back to about 900 the next year (7 counts and 83 observers). Statewide totals in the thousands were frequently reported until about 1970, after which numbers in the low to middle hundreds (and since 1980, occasionally less than 100) became the norm. In 2002 there were 477 Rusty Blackbirds observed in SC (18 counts with 630 observers).

It seems clear that the above numbers reflect a decline in the wintering Rusty Blackbird population in SC since the 1960's. As forested wetland habitat in the state disappears, the average number of Rusty Blackbirds observed on Christmas Bird Counts may continue to drop. These long-term data exemplify the real value of following populations of "common" species (which the Rusty Blackbird once was), not just the rare ones, as indicators of changing environmental conditions.

So now that the Christmas Bird Count season is upon us, I urge you to participate! There are several counts within an hour's drive of downtown Charleston, including of course the Charleston Christmas Bird Count on January 2. You can also take part in the Great Backyard Bird Count February 18-21 and not have to leave your home. What else can we do to help keep birds like the Rusty Blackbird around in years to come? Support the protection of wildlife habitat (through funding the federal Land and Water Conservation Act and the SC Conservation Land Bank, and advocating legislation to protect isolated wetlands); help save "at-risk" species by asking Congress to fund the State Wildlife Grants Program; speak out against the weakening of laws such as the Endangered Species Act; and do what you can to live in an environmentally-friendly manner.

Why Not Dogs on the Beach?

A change of rules allowing dogs off-leash on Folly Beach during the winter months has recently been discussed. While the measure appears to be off the table, it is important to understand how a few dogs could be so bad for area birds.

Shorebirds – sanderlings, willets, plovers, etc. – are among the most threatened birds in North America: 61% of shorebird species are in significant decline, some by as much as 80% over the past 30 years. S.C. beaches, including Folly Island, provide critical habitat for migratory shorebirds. During the winter, these habitats provide feeding and resting grounds for birds that must gain fat to fuel their Spring migrations.

In Spring, these small birds travel hundreds or even thousands of miles to reach their breeding grounds. To fuel this journey, they need to store

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