



The Mountain Warbler

Newsletter of the Highlands Plateau Audubon Society – February 2012

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.

Message from the President

The concept of Audubon sanctuaries was one of the things that attracted me to the National Audubon Society when I was a boy; the Audubon Society was clearly ‘doing something’ tangible for conservation. There is a unique appeal to know that valuable habitat will be protected indefinitely. The Audubon Society was the earliest, and remains a premier, guardian of bird sanctuaries in the U.S. I continue to look forward to visiting Audubon sanctuaries, for example, Audubon North Carolina’s newly constituted Pine Island Audubon Sanctuary, in far northeastern NC.

Audubon sanctuaries are typically created in association with the national and state Audubon organizations and with large metropolitan Audubon chapters that have the resources to become involved with projects involving real estate. The HPAS is a relatively small chapter in both members and resources. While many existing sanctuaries are organized around specific, high-density bird habitat, the birds in our area typically don’t congregate here in especially high densities for either overwintering or during the breeding season. And one of the attractions to western NC is knowing that we are blessed with an area that is rich in land that already has some element of protected status, so some might think that preserving bird habitat here is not a priority. Nevertheless, the southern Appalachians are recognized as some of the most significant bird habitat in North America and somehow the absence of mountain Audubon sanctuaries seems a little incongruous.

So does our mountain chapter have an active role to play in the Audubon sanctuary tradition, beyond contributing resources to state and national programs? One obvious answer has to do with maintaining our own properties with native habitat in mind. HPAS, Audubon NC’s Treasure Highlands initiative, our local garden clubs, and the Highlands Biological Station have all been active in promoting this approach as an important opportunity to ‘act locally’. Regarding our own gardens and woods as essentially mini-Audubon sanctuaries can be an important and personally satisfying achievement.

However, there may be additional activities that we as a small Audubon chapter can actively contribute to the Audubon tradition of habitat preservation. The well-established local land trusts (e.g., Highlands Cashiers Land Trust and Land Trust for the Little Tennessee) provide a mechanism for environmentally conscious persons or corporations to limit for perpetuity the extent of further development on portions of privately owned properties, while at the same time recognizing the requirement for maintaining current use patterns. Identifying significant bird habitat, which may coincide with potential new environmental easements, can be used as one of several parameters that help prioritize and encourage designation of environmental easement

status. This spring, together with the Highlands Cashiers Land Trust, HPAS plans to participate in a new project to help provide data for 'priority' bird species found on one or two large parcels of land and thus hopefully make available an additional 'layer' of information to the HCLT for making land-use recommendations to interested land owners of potential environmental easements. This alliance between two local groups hopefully will be an excellent opportunity for our chapter to become part of an activity that speaks to bird habitat preservation in the spirit of an Audubon sanctuary. *(Editor's note: A related article is at the end of this newsletter.*

Christmas Bird Count Was a Success

On December 16, over a dozen early-rising volunteer birders, armed with binoculars and wearing warm clothes, participated locally in Audubon's annual Christmas Bird Count. Now completing its 112th year, this early-winter bird census is the longest running Citizen Science survey in the world! Those who participated were part of a wonderful tradition, enjoying the treasure of each species tallied, and all in the service of assessing the health of bird populations - and to help guide conservation efforts.

The birders were joined by Jessica Webb of the Highlander newspaper. Other HPAS members met the birders for a hardy chili lunch at the Pooles. There the number of species seen was tallied as each group of 3-5 members good-naturedly competed in marking "seen" a species not viewed by any of the others.

CHICKS: It's All Gone to the Birds Opening Reception 5 – 7 PM, March 31 at The Bascom

The Bunzl Gallery will be filled with a plethora of art works that portray an avian theme. Despite the focus on a single theme, the exhibition offers rich variety. Artists pursue the topic through a range of approaches and media. This exhibition, devoted to our feathered friends, provides a broad look into the world of contemporary and traditional art, letting divergent approaches take wing. From the traditional to the way out and wacky, visitors will experience a flight of fancy.

This exhibit is presented in partnership with the Highlands Biological Station and the Highlands Plateau Audubon Society. Among the speakers arranged by the Bascom who will present during the exhibit, which runs through June 17, are Mr. Curtis Smalling, Audubon NC, IBA Coordinator; Mr. John Yow, author of *The Armchair Birder*; and Dr. Lloyd Newberry, collector, conservator.

HPAS will participate during the Exhibition in several ways, including the following: Some of our members will serve as docents at the opening (contact Romney Bathurst if you wish to participate in this way); one of our evening programs is scheduled for Friday, June 1, at The Bascom; and our kick-off field trip on Saturday, May 5, will begin and end at The Bascom.

Whooping Cranes in Western North Carolina!

The following is a short summary of a historic event in Western NC, as told by our own members. E-mail sent: 12/17/2011 4:32:13 P.M. Eastern Standard Time. Subj; whooping cranes:

Thanks to (*name currently withheld*) whose excellent photos follow, Michelle Styring and I were able to have fantastic views of these 2 Whooping Cranes feeding placidly in a field of corn stubble in Hayesville this AM. They have apparently been there for 2 or 3 days already, but as you can see from (*withheld*) message, they are still there this afternoon. I really would expect them to leave quite soon, as winds are NW and temps. are falling. Sure hope they get where they should, and soon! We could see that they were quite sensitive to the sounds of gunshots echoing from the hills around Hayesville, and a dog barking too. We tried to use the car as a blind and stay a reasonable distance away – with her big lens, (*withheld*) got these close-ups, carefully. As you can see, they are both banded and equipped with tracking antennas, so we must assume that someone knows exactly where they are. It was a wonderful experience, all in all, a Christmas lifer for me and Michelle too. <http://www.highlandsaudubonsociety.org/Cranes.html>

Editor: Written by Romney Bathurst, Director/Member, as is Michelle, of Highlands Plateau Audubon Society. As of this printing we are studying the possibility of including a more complete story, with pictures, on our web site.

Come To The Movies! Free!

On Tuesday, March 13, “The Big Year” will be presented at 4:00 pm at the Hudson Library in Highlands. We are offering this film for your enjoyment in the “off season” as we await the return of our neotropical migrants in the Spring.

On January 1, 1998, three especially talented birders from disparate backgrounds embarked independently on a year-long quest to achieve a record setting goal of exceeding 732 bird species sightings in North America. Mark Obmascik, an award-winning author, subsequently published a delightful and amusing non-fiction book in 2004 (The Big Year) that recounted the adventures and misadventures of these birders as they pursued their year-long goal. The success of Obmascik’s book eventually prompted a decision to develop a fictional account of the story. The resulting film, which was directed by Oscar winner David Frankel and stars Steve Martin, Jack Black and Owen Wilson, was released in October 2011 amid an understandable level of trepidation among the birding community concerning its comedic content. The names of the birders were changed and the plot was slightly modified, but the film represents a realistic, accurate and respectful presentation of the story and its cast of highly competitive birders.

April Field Trip to Huntington Beach State Park

Our first field trip for 2012 will be to Huntington Beach State Park in South Carolina. We plan to visit the park on April 23rd and 24th. This time of year we should find many resident and migrating warblers and shorebirds. The park boasts excellent examples of freshwater lagoons, salt marsh, maritime forest and beach habitats. If time allows, we can also visit nearby Myrtle Beach State Park and Brookfield Gardens and the historic “Atalaya” castle located within the park. We plan to stay at the Murrells Inlet Hampton Inn. Please call 843-651-6687 and ask for the Highlands Audubon special rate. Plan to arrive Sunday, April 22nd so you will be ready to go early Monday morning. Murrells Inlet is an attractive resort town and the “seafood capital of South Carolina”, so you may want to extend your stay to enjoy the many attractions of this area known as the Grand Strand. Call Brock Hutchins at 770-486-3715 for additional information and trip schedule.

Looking for New Birders!

Have you been hesitant to join an Audubon field trip because you don't know how to use binoculars or a field guide? The first Saturday field trip of each month will be designed just for you! Take advantage of these dates to begin a new hobby or just to enjoy the natural wonders on the plateau in a new way. Field trip leaders will have binoculars available for you to borrow – and will show you how to use them. Leaders will have field guides and will help you become familiar with those. They can also give tips on choosing binoculars and field guides. Walks will be easy, relatively level and fun. Come join us!

Weekly Saturday Field Trips

In addition to the “First Saturday of the Month Field Trips”, for new birders, we will continue to offer the variety of trips that may involve carpooling. New birders are just as welcome on these trips. These will be announced on the website as well as in the newspapers. When we are able to plan a trip, with plenty of advance notice, we will include it in the newsletter. Right now we are scheduled for Southern Highlands Reserve on the 8th of May. Check their web site at (www.southernhighlandsreserve.org). Another is to Lonesome Valley on May 12th. For recent additions and possible schedule changes check our website.

Conservation Corner

(Editor's note: This is a follow-up article from the President at the beginning of the newsletter.)

The concept of Audubon chapters partnering with land trusts to help influence preservation of bird habitat (see Message from the President) seemed to me to be such a natural alliance that I naively assumed that this would be a popular Audubon chapter-associated activity nationwide. I expected that methodologies for gathering bird data for the benefit of actionable land trust decision-making would be readily available. There certainly are many good examples of bird census methods and analytic processes for detailed evaluation; however, relatively modest but robust sampling methods, of the sort I had envisioned that might be accomplished with available HPAS resources, do not seem to be at all common. So we will need to borrow parts from other survey methods and experiment with our own limited resources and experienced personnel.

One limitation to meaningful bird surveys can be dense vegetation, such as is common in this area in the warmer months, is that many birds are most readily detected when they vocalize, and typically many species (e.g., warblers) are vocal primarily when nesting and defending territories. So the window for surveys that will account for such species is relatively short (May-June). Another significant challenge is to develop protocols that accurately account for the presence of specific bird species in a manner that can be replicated, and hence meaningfully compared, with comparable areas, or from surveys made on different years and by different amateur observers. We are still in the process of thinking about and developing these protocols. One method that I am interested in experimenting with is a simple “call and response” method wherein one briefly plays a song of a particular species of interest and then waits a specified period of time to see or hear if a bird of that species responds. This method has been used with many bird surveys, including large-scale cerulean and golden-winged warbler studies. However, I am not familiar with examples of bird surveys that have used call and response methods for multiple bird species. This should be an interesting and perhaps somewhat original project; suggestions are welcome!

We are Expanding our Program Offerings this year!

The *first version* of the program schedule for the year should be available in the April newsletter. But, for program offerings to expand the list has to change quickly to take advantage of new opportunities! That means that over the season, for summer residents, and over the year, for year round residents, the schedule will change. In order to communicate those changes to you in a timely and easy to access way we will be diversifying both our print and digital communication methods. While we will still mail newsletters, have articles in magazines and newspapers, place notices and brochures around the area, we will increase the use of state of the art digital. For those with access to computers and the Internet e-mail and web sites will become an important part of informing our community of the environment that draws so many people to our area.

LOCAL CHAPTER MEMBERSHIP

In September of 2010 the HPAS membership consisted of 117 individuals and 3 corporate members. By the same period in 2011 the membership had grown to 135 individuals and 4 corporate members. Increasing our membership numbers affords us more funds and the ability to provide more services to our members. We welcome all our new members and look forward to getting to know you better in the coming years.

Annual membership in Highlands Plateau Audubon Society runs from May 1 through April 30. Joining National does automatically make you a member of HPAS, but no money comes to HPAS. If you want to support HPAS, please join locally. Several of you have already renewed or joined for the 2012/13 year. Thank you for your early support. If anyone else would like to renew a little early – or join for the first time – please complete and return the form below with your check to:

HPAS, P.O. BOX 833, Highlands, NC 28741

_____ Individual \$15

_____ Family \$25

_____ *Friend \$100

_____ *Donor \$250

_____ *Patron \$500

_____ *Benefactor \$1000

_____ Please send my newsletter by email
to save expense and trees!

Name

Summer Mailing Address

City/State/Zip

Telephone

Email

Winter address, if different:

From: _____ To: _____
Months for this address

*LOCAL Memberships at the levels of Friend and above include (unless you prefer not) our payment of your membership dues for the National Audubon Society, which helps protect birds, other wildlife, and their habitats nationally and internationally, therefore increasing the impact your membership has on the environment. National membership includes six issues each year of Audubon magazine. Local membership also opens the door for certain special functions and other benefits the board will be considering as the season approaches.

Audubon North Carolina to Host Chapter Day

Audubon North Carolina has scheduled Chapter Day for Saturday, March 17, at the NC Zoo in Asheboro. For further information check our website: www.highlandsaudubonsociety.org

Great Backyard Bird Count

The GBBC is scheduled for Feb 17-20. The Great Backyard Bird Count 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. Check www.highlandsaudubonsociety.org for further information.

Highlands Plateau Audubon Society

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