



# The Mountain Warbler

Newsletter of the Highlands Plateau Audubon Society – August 2016

Cashiers – Franklin – Highlands – Scaly Mountain

[www.highlandsaudubonsociety.org](http://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 . . .*

### **A good day's birding together**

Recently, I participated in one of our scheduled HPAS birding outings. The venue was a readily accessible portion of the Cashiers Village Green (CVG). There were only seven of us. We saw a reasonably modest 28 species that didn't include any highly unusual birds or even several of our typically common species (e.g., no Chickadees, Nuthatches, or Juncos). Nevertheless, I think it is fair to say that we all enjoyed a very good morning birding. On my way home I began to reflect on some of the aspects that can contribute to a good day of group birding.

One of the obvious key components has to do with one's birding companions. In the example mentioned above, we had an interesting cross section of convivial birders. A senior, experienced birder joined us. We had another 'expert resource' or 'go-to' birder. We had varying levels of intermediate birders (including me). And we had a pair of self-identified novice birders. Most importantly, everyone was genuinely interested in the project at hand. And the enthusiasm and willingness to share sightings and information up and down the 'experience ladder' was infectious.

The group was small, and it was easy to work together and remain focused on helping each other share the experience. There was occasional, pleasant human 'chit-chat', however, conversations remained secondary to the outing's primary birding goal. At the first glance or sound of something interesting, marginal conversations 'took a backseat' to making sure everyone got a good look at the bird in question. And typically, after a good sighting, the group took the opportunity to discuss what we'd just seen/experienced. An occasional, pleasant non-bird, 'social bonus' of the Cashiers Village Green venue were the handful of random encounters we experienced with other like-minded people and friends who were out and about and enjoying their morning too.

Seeing an unusual bird species can be a real thrill for birders of all experience levels. However, for me, getting a really GOOD look at even a common species, perhaps engaged in some sort of interesting behavior or vocalizing, is a goal that I hope all members of an outing get to share. I can be happy watching relatively common species, such as the Northern Catbirds and Brown Thrashers that thrive on the CVG, doing what they do. A big part of the fun for some of us is recognizing interesting species-specific behaviors/vocalizations and perhaps even trying to anticipate what the bird(s) will likely do next. You don't need lots of rare species to have a good day birding and, in any case, we are blessed with some rather spectacular relatively common species (e.g., Northern Cardinals, Cedar Waxwings, American Goldfinches, Eastern Bluebirds, and Barn Swallows).

A 'plus' for the relatively wide-open Cashiers venue is the opportunity to readily observe birds flying overhead (e.g., Barn and Rough-winged Swallow, Chimney Swifts, a single, high-flying Red-tailed Hawk, etc.). Our dense cove forests provide wonderful bird habitat for a variety of species, for example many of our Warblers species; however, one must frequently be patient to get good looks at birds and "birding by ear" takes on a more important role when deep in the woods. A homogeneous, dense rhododendron thicket represents an extreme for limited bird species diversity, visibility, and for the inability to bird overhead (you might be very lucky to see a Hooded Warbler).

The question of the ethics of using electronic (e.g., cell phone) recordings to illicit *species-specific* responses almost always comes up during group bird outings. Clearly any sensitive person does not want to cause a valued native species to undergo excessive duress as a result of playing a recording (e.g., taking perhaps critical time away from incubating eggs, feeding young, defending a territory, watching for predators, etc.). And it is important to remember just how energetically demanding the life of a bird can be. Responding to a recording that might, for example, temporarily perturb established territorial boundaries and conceivably could be a significant, energy-intensive, but non-productive, event in the life of a small bird. For human observers, experiencing a bird respond to a recording is at best educational but

needs to be used with careful moderation. And be aware that playing bird recordings, especially of certain endangered species, may be illegal within some parkland areas.

So it is clear that use of readily available cell phone ‘conspecific’ bird recordings needs to be exercised with great care and moderation. Presumably, the same care should be exercised if one is tempted to play the call of an avian predator (e.g., screech owl) or the alarm call of a wren or chickadee, to which multiple small bird species may respond and thus interrupt their routine activities. Eliciting *non-species specific* responses presumably could also be imagined to trigger energetically wasteful events in the life of small birds; birds with metabolic rates that are hard for us to imagine. What about the time-honored practice of “pishing” which emulates a generic small bird alarm call? The gray areas for what is ethically appropriate are getting ‘grayer’...but as compassionate birders these considerations are worth considering and perhaps discussing during a thoughtful group outing.

The recent outing on the Cashiers Village Green once again refreshed my enthusiasm for even modest HPAS bird field trips. I was again reminded that the success of an outings program may not necessarily need to be measured in number of outings, number of participants, or numbers or rarity of bird species encountered. As long as enthusiastic persons get together to enjoy and learn from their group experiences, there is no substitute for a good day’s birding.

*Russell Regnery*

## Hog Island

For a week in June, I had the fortunate opportunity to visit Hog Island, Maine, where the Audubon Society has been offering “bird camp” since 1936.

As I settled into my dorm room, I reflected on the work that it took to get me to that small island. Last fall, the Highlands Plateau Audubon Society’s board of directors – on which I have served as secretary since 2013 – awarded me a scholarship to apply towards tuition for a class. This was a welcome surprise that led me to apply for an additional scholarship from National Audubon Society, aided by a letter of recommendation from Russell Regnery. In January I was accepted into the program and soon began to receive emails about making the complicated travel plans.

To get to Hog Island, I woke up at 3:30 a.m. to drive two hours to Doraville, Georgia so that I could take the MARTA to the airport in Atlanta and avoid downtown traffic. Following a 2.5-hour flight, a friend collected me from the airport and drove me 1.5 hours to Bremen, Maine where Hog Island is but a two-minute ferry ride away.

Despite the miles and hours between Hog Island and my home in Franklin, the two places felt remarkably connected. As a student of biology and employee for a conservation nonprofit (The Wilderness Society), I am painfully aware that “everything is connected.” But at Hog Island, like never before, I felt the interconnectedness of these landscapes and of the critters that inhabit the sky, the land, the sea and all of the

spaces in between.

The Black-throated Green warblers that I strained to hear in the southern Appalachians this spring were as common as American Crows on Hog Island. The creatures that inhabit the tidal zone of the island were food for the birds flying around me. These birds in turn were potential prey for bigger birds like Bald Eagles that venture further inland ... where the elevation steadily rises up to the Appalachian Trail and its rugged spruce fir forest. I stood on that trail in Maine in June, knowing that it led all of the way back to North Carolina, to within a half mile of my home near Standing Indian Campground.

Hog Island changed my life. I saw puffins and held a Herring Gull’s fledgling chick. I got lost following a Hermit Thrush’s enchanting song. I accidentally startled an osprey in a low perch along the shore at dusk. I watched cormorants basking on rocks with harbor seals, and was soothed by the humming of distant diesel engine boats as lobstermen checked their traps in Muscongus Bay.



**Michelle Ruigrok holds a Herring Gull’s fledgling chick on her Hog Island visit.**



**Hog Island, Maine, is a destination for birding and Audubon hosts a “bird camp” there.**

I met wonderfully kind people all bonded by a shared love for birds. Now, back in Franklin, I can watch the Osprey chicks on Hog Island grow up because there is a webcam affixed to their nest (<http://explore.org/live-cams/player/osprey-nest> ).

My knowledge of and passion for birds has deepened, and my commitment to landscape-level conservation has strengthened. While the ocean screams at me every day to return to the coast, maybe - just maybe - the loons, egrets, osprey, puffins, warblers, crabs and spruce fir forest of Maine might benefit from the work of The Highlands Plateau Audubon Society and The Wilderness Society as we all work together to protect this precious landscape and all of the creatures and plants that live within it, including ourselves.

*Michelle Ruigrok*

## **Remembering a friend, John Stowers**

Sto passed away July 9 after a short illness. He was a member of the Highlands Audubon Society and active in the community promoting conservation of the natural world. Everyone who knew him is deeply saddened by this tragic event. Our hearts and prayers go out to Sto's family and especially his wife Jennie.



**The view from John and Jennie Stowers' home in Dauphin Island.**

Our group had a special relationship with Sto. This year and for many years before, Sto and Jennie hosted us at their home on Dauphin Island, Alabama and gave us a base for a spring birding trip. They went beyond normal and totally abandoned their spacious home and all their possessions, sometimes staying at a nearby RV park to give us more room. The Dauphin Island trip has been special and perhaps the highlight of the birding season for many of us at Highlands Plateau Audubon.

Sto was a generous man. He shared his infectious enthusiasm for birding, conservation and nature. He shared his time and possessions with others to instill that same enthusiasm for his birds. We will miss him, and are grateful for the opportunity to know him.

In lieu of flowers, the family requests memorials be made to the Highlands Biological Foundation, PO Box 580, Highlands, NC 28741, the Dauphin Island Bird Sanctuaries, PO Box 1295, Dauphin Island, AL 36528, the Montgomery Therapeutic Center, 604 Augusta Avenue, Montgomery, AL 36111, or the charity of your choice.

*Brock Hutchins*

## **HPAS nest box project gets help**

As many of you know, the HPAS nest box project was greatly enhanced this year with the help of Dr. Barbara Ballentine and her student, Traci Ballence. Once it was determined that a Carolina Chickadee had successfully hatched nestlings in any of our 150 boxes, Traci consistently monitored the box every other day. On each outing she would gently pick up each hatchling with its siblings, put them into a container and weigh them. She did this until she determined that fledging time was near. Then she did not disturb them in order to avoid provoking premature fledging.

Below is the article Traci wrote about her study. For those of you who missed her interesting, funny and heart-warming oral presentation to HPAS in June, this may help you get a better understanding of what she is doing and why.

*Michelle Styring*

## *Effects of Nest Building Behavior on Incubation and Reproductive Success in Carolina Chickadees (Poecile carolinensis)*

Nest building in song birds is typically carried out by females. Variation in female ability to build nests can potentially impact reproductive success. Research confirms that a well-constructed nest reduces the negative effects of cooling on eggs and nestlings. Embryos do not develop properly if they are not kept at a constant temperature during incubation which can cause failure to hatch or asynchrony. After hatching, nestlings are unable to thermo-regulate their body temperature until they are 8 days old, and they depend solely on their mother to regulate their body temperature. Females transfer heat directly to eggs and young nestlings through a featherless highly vascularized area of their breast called a brood patch. Incubation and brooding is costly to females because it prevents females from participating in other activities such as foraging. Therefore, trade-offs may exist when faced with nest building and energy constraints. In this study, I am investigating the effects of nest quality on incubation and reproductive success in Carolina Chickadees, the common occupant of HPAS nest boxes.



**Traci Balance carefully weighs a Carolina Chickadee hatching.**

Beginning in March 2016, HPAS nest boxes were checked weekly for signs of nesting material and eggs. Once females had a full clutch of eggs, I recorded nest dimensions and installed an i-button that collects nest temperature data every 5 minutes. I installed a second i-button in the nest box to record the ambient temperature of the box. Each i-button can store data for up to 6 days. Therefore, all data had to be downloaded every 6 days and reconfigured for the remaining time of incubation. Comparison of the changes in nest temperature relative to ambient temperature will allow estimations to be made of periods of incubation by the female. After hatching, i-buttons were removed from the nest and nest box, and nestlings were weighed every-other-day between days 2- 12 using a digital scale to the nearest 0.1g. Special care was taken to handle all hatchlings in a delicate manner while weighing. Individual growth weights of nestlings can be calculated as a measure of reproductive success. For example, large growth rates of nestlings indicate superior rates of development which indicate higher probability of successful post

fledging. At day 12, i-buttons were re-installed to record fledging data until day 15-21 when fledglings were expected to fledge. Evidence of fledging includes fledglings on the ground near the box, feces on the inside of box walls, a compacted nest cup, and adult

Carolina Chickadees feeding young in a nearby area. After fledging, all nest dimensions were measured again. Nests were then collected in individual storage bags, were labeled, and were stored at Highlands Biological Station where they could be dried so that dry mass could be measured.

During fall 2016, I will be using the software Rhythm and Raven to measure female on-bout and off-bout periods of incubation. I will use the statistical software “R” to examine how measures of nest dimensions influence incubation and reproductive success. My prediction is that nest architecture will predict both female incubation behavior and reproductive success. Thank you to Western Carolina University, Dr. Barbara Ballentine (thesis advisor), my thesis committee, Highlands Plateau Audubon Society, and Highlands Biological Station. I am grateful for the continued support, encouragement, and enthusiasm that I have received during my research. Thank you to all volunteers for your dedication, and thank you to all for allowing me access to nest boxes on your property. I look forward to sharing my results with you! Thank you!

**Traci Balance**

*WCU Graduate Student, Department of Biology*

### **The 13<sup>th</sup> Annual Mountain Wildlife Days**

HPAS has again co-sponsored the well-attended summer celebration of wildlife in our mountain locale and beyond. The two days of activity began on Friday, July 15, with a “Let’s Get Acquainted with our Birds” bird walk led by our President, Russ Regnery. The group of 13 donned binoculars in the Village Green in Cashiers and spotted 20 species of birds, including up close examinations of active nests of Bluebirds, House Wrens and Barn Swallows. (See Russ’ Message from the President in this newsletter that references a previous outing.)





**Russ Regnery, above left, with Carlton Burke and a female Barred Owl.**

Other activities of the day included nature hikes, a “Birds of Prey” presentation by Michael Skinner and an evening presentation by Bill Lea entitled “Bobcats, Foxes and More—God Made Predators, Too.”

On Saturday, Russ was the master of ceremonies for the presentations about bears by Cynthia Strain, birds of prey by Carlton Burke, wolves by Rob Gudger and “Unique Animals from Australia” provided by the North Georgia Zoo. Outside the auditorium were exhibits, an extensive silent auction and representatives of various organizations and artists.

Ann Campbell set up and attended the impressive HPAS Exhibit that highlighted our next box project that will enter its third year next year and the native plants for the birds initiative in cooperation with Audubon North Carolina.

## **Thank you for your 2016 Membership Renewals**

We are so appreciative to everyone who has renewed their membership this year! If you have not yet renewed, it is not too late. Please take a moment to fill out a membership form (found at our website: [www.highlandsaudubonsociety.org](http://www.highlandsaudubonsociety.org)) and mail it to: HPAS, P.O. Box 833, Highlands, NC 28741.

Your membership donation helps to support our local educational programs, birding field trips, newsletters, and local projects such as the growing citizen science cavity-nesting bird box project. Your support helps your local chapter continue to thrive!

## **Spring and Summer HPAS outings, activities & programs**

*Visit [www.highlandsaudubonsociety.org](http://www.highlandsaudubonsociety.org) or call 828- 526-1939*

**August 6** – HPAS birding with Russ Regnery at the old ranger’s station and beyond. Meet at 8 a.m. at the Kelsey-Hutchins Founders Park in Highlands. Some hiking involved. Loaner binoculars available.

**August 7** - Annual HPAS summer picnic at the Recreation Center Pavilion in Highlands. Come at 6 p.m. with a covered dish: salad, vegetable or desert for 10 people. Meat will be provided. Set up at 5:00 p.m. Call Dee Andry so that she knows how many to buy for: 828-787-1586.

**August 15** – The film “A Murder of Crows” will be presented at 7:30 p.m. at Hudson Library in Highlands following a mixer at 7:00 p.m. Please enter through the back door.

**August 16** - Birds and Beer (or wine or tea) at the Ugly Dog in Highlands. Spirited discussion of birds and birding starting at 5 p.m. and continuing with sandwiches and other pub grub.

**August 29** – “Turtle Conservation” presented by HPAS President Russ Regnery. The program begins at 7:30 p.m. at Hudson Library in Highlands following a mixer at 7:00 p.m. Please enter through the back door.

**September 12** – A film entitled “Winged Migration” will be presented at 7:30 p.m. at the Hudson Library in Highlands with a mixer at 7 p.m. Enter through the back door.

**September 17** - The annual Charlie Davis Memorial Blue Ridge Parkway Outing searching for migrating warblers, vireos, thrushes and raptors on the Blue Ridge Parkway. We leave at 7:00 a.m. from Kelsey-Hutchinson Founders Park in Highlands. Please pack a light lunch as we will stop at a scenic spot for a picnic and more birding before returning mid-afternoon. Bring water and your camera. The Parkway in autumn provides spectacular views and interesting birds even in less than perfect weather. Little hiking. Call Brock Hutchins, 404-295-0663, with questions.

**September 21-September 25** – Informal hawk watches will be conducted, conditions permitting by Brock Hutchins during this time. As success is dependent on favorable winds and reports from points east of us, it is essential to give Brock indication of your interest and email address, as he will need to notify you the day or even night before he goes up Whiteside Mountain. Be sure to bring water, camera and bins, as the views are great and it can get quite hot up on the rock lookout. Some patience is required, but the rewards can be awesome – 300 Broad-winged Hawks kettling above is a pretty cool sight!

**September 26** – Annual meeting at 7 p.m. at the Civic Center in Highlands, followed by a presentation on the Golden Eagle Project by Christine Kelly of the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission. <http://www.ncwildlife.org/>

## Officers

**President** -- Russ Regnery, 404-558-1085  
**Vice - President** – Bill Peavey, 828-369-1553

**Secretary** – Michelle Ruigrok, 919-621-0844  
**Treasurer** – Brock Hutchins, 770-486-3715

## Directors and Committee Chairs

**Communications** – Avary Doubleday  
**Conservation** – Kyle Pursel  
**Education** – Ann Campbell  
**Field Trips** – Romney Bathurst  
**Finance** – Brock Hutchins  
**Hospitality** – Dee Andry  
**Membership & Development** – Mary Jo Askew and Sarah Pursel

**Nominating & Leadership Development** – Don Shure  
**Program** – Bill Peavey

**At Large** – George Kaye, Conservation  
Pat Strickland, Communications  
Gail Lemiec, Conservation  
Michelle Styring, Nest Box Project  
Glenda Zahner, Education

**Newsletter Editor:** Jessica Webb

**Web Master:** Jean McCormick



**Highlands Plateau Audubon Society**  
**P. O. Box 833**  
**Highlands, NC 28741**