



The Mountain Warbler

Newsletter of the Highlands Plateau Audubon Society – December 2016

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 . . .

My, how fast some things seem to change!

I admit that I have long considered that the local “temperate rainforest” in which we live, and all the bio-diversity that comes with it, as relatively ecologically stable. Even National Audubon’s climate change models from a year or two ago suggested a lesser climate change impact on the birds in these mountains than on surrounding areas.

Now, after a prolonged seasonal drought, we are hosting firefighters from all over the U.S., including places like Arizona, who are working hard to prevent damage to ‘property,’ while month-old fires continue to spread and burn through nearby, tinder-dry National Forest lands.

Can we hope this seasonal drought is a ‘one-off’ anomaly? Will our forests return to their once lush status? Will the ecology of our forests truly reap the benefits of fire as is frequently suggested? Are we witnessing a transition from temperate rainforest to a “fire-climax” ecology?

These are pretty scary thoughts that may be resolved sooner rather than later. I really hope the proponents of fire as a tool for ecologic management will document what changes, in terms of biodiversity and threatened species, result for the current drought and fires in our mountain forests.

Not long ago, National Audubon was proud to be ‘out in front’ with the concept of possible impact of climate change as related to native bird distributions. Now, tippy toeing around the concept of climate change seems like ‘yesterday’s news,’ especially to anyone who is sensitive to what it is like to live near sea level. A local Georgia coastal paper, the Golden Island News (not known as environmentally progressive), headlined a front page story November 20th with “King Tides Have Surely Come” and then led off with the matter-of-fact statement: “The abnormally high tides that accompanied the ‘Supermoon’ this past week are going to continue to get higher, become more frequent and will eventually seriously affect the ability of people to live and businesses to operate in low-lying coastal areas like Brunswick and the Golden Isles.” It is hard to dispute the observation that Main Street is now routinely covered with a few inches of salt water several times a year. Within only a couple of years, sea level rise has become an undisputed fact of life, although what it will mean to the future of the coastal communities and the ecology of coastal areas are just beginning to be sorted out. It is hard to imagine that not long ago the topic of sea level rise and climate change was considered sensitive and controversial.

We are of course on the cusp of a period of what appears to be significant political change within our country. What this will mean in terms of societal change is unclear, however, from what has been suggested so far it may be a different era of environmental sensitivity at the federal level. As we wait for the ‘shoes to drop’ with regard to possible changes in national environmental policy, it is worth considering that what happens at our local and regional levels may be more important than before. Deciding how to personally respond to change may be a challenge; participating will always be an important responsibility.

Russell Regnery

Christmas Bird Count

Join in our annual bird count on December 16

One of our Chapter’s most important annual activities will take place on Friday, December 16: our annual bird

count. This highly collegial event is both enjoyable and relevant to our mission of environmental and wildlife conservation. You do not have to be an expert birder to join in. If you have never participated in the Christmas Bird Count (CBC), consider becoming involved this year. Start by saving that date.

Every winter since 1900 the National Audubon Society has sponsored the CBC. Today, CBCs take place across the U.S., Canada, Latin America, and beyond. The CBC mobilizes over 2,400 counting groups including over 60,000 individuals whose counts total upwards of 70 million birds. These yearly bird counts feed what is perhaps the largest citizen science database in the world.

The cumulative bird counts are being used to specify winter bird distributions and the “climate space” in which many of our bird species exist. National Audubon has released “The Audubon Report” focusing on 588 North American bird species and the likely impact of rising temperatures. An alarming 126 North American bird species are projected to lose 50 percent of their existing ranges to climate change by 2050; another 188 birds could lose half their current range by 2080. Like the canary in the mine, bird data from the CBC are being used to foretell our collective future.

Join the Highlands Plateau Audubon Society for this important activity. We will meet at the **Kelsey-Hutchinson Founders Park in Highlands at 7:30 a.m. on the 16th**. Binoculars and expert guidance will be provided. A chili lunch will be provided at the Hudson Library from 12 noon to 3 pm. Email Brock Hutchins at brockhutchins@bellsouth.net for more information or to join the effort. If you are willing to contribute cornbread or a finger dessert for the lunch, please contact Michelle Styring at 678-491-0145 or Msty30005@aol.com.

William McReynolds

Interns search for habitat of the rare Golden-winged Warbler

The Highlands Biological Station (HBS) is hosting ten students from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH) for its semester-long Institute for the Environment program. In addition to the class, students are working on an internship project with local mentors. Two of those students, Lauren Whitenack and Tasmia Zaman, are focusing on Golden-winged warblers in western North Carolina, working with Gail Lemiec of the Highlands Nature Center and Aimee Tomcho from Audubon NC.

For the past decade, Audubon NC has searched for and located sites hosting breeding Golden-winged Warblers, a rapidly declining species of songbird that nests in early successional habitat bordering mature hardwood forest. The species breeds from southeastern Canada into the northern-midwestern and northeastern United States, as well as in select moderate to high elevation sites in the Appalachian Mountains.

The project focuses on finding potential breeding habitats for Golden-winged Warblers in Jackson, Macon, and Graham counties of western North Carolina. This species requires a specific habitat composition with herbaceous and shrub layers for nesting and mature forest in which to forage and perch. This kind of habitat can be found in a variety of locations, from abandoned orchards to powerline corridors. To locate these potential habitats, the interns are developing a computer model using ArcGIS that incorporates different landscape characteristics (i.e. elevation, vegetation cover, soil type) to rank areas in Jackson, Macon, and Graham counties by predicted habitat suitability. Potential sites will be highlighted on a map of the three counties. The interns will then visit the sites to see if the habitat physically matches what their model predicted the site would be like. They hope that the map will help Audubon volunteers to locate breeding Golden-winged Warblers when the birds return for the spring.

Tasmia and Lauren are Environmental Science majors at UNC-Chapel Hill studying at Highlands Biological Station for the semester to gain field experience and learn about the ecology of the southern Appalachian Mountains. Tasmia loves nature and has been an avid birder since middle school.

Lauren began her journey into the field of wildlife biology in high school when she volunteered at the Intermountain Bird Observatory in Idaho, banding birds and helping with various projects. Since then, she has continued to gain experience by working with the US Forest Service in Asheville on an amphibian and reptile study, working in a lab at the UNC School of Pharmacy, and interning with Boise State’s Raptor Research Center. She hopes to attend graduate school and land a career in research.

Gail Lemiec

Wildfire response in western North Carolina

I live by Standing Indian Campground on West Old Murphy Road. On November 2, I watched the helicopters going to the Boteler Peak fire from my home. That afternoon, however, a U.S. Forest Service truck drove past my house, going the opposite direction from Boteler Peak. A first responder and West Macon Fire Truck came next, followed soon after by the smell of smoke, confirming that there was indeed another wildfire: The Buck Knob Fire. What ensued was an impressive procession of Forest Service vehicles, wildland fire trucks, local fire trucks, first responders, a dozer, and then of course the helicopters. I was awestruck.

Right now, professional women and men from across the country are here supporting local crews. Together with the staff of our Nantahala-Pisgah National Forests, local first responders and county fire departments, they are working to manage numerous wildfires on our national forest. With limited resources, these crews are tasked with balancing public safety (and their own) with the health of the forest (because fire under the right conditions can have long-term benefits for some types of forest).

Unfortunately, unlike the dedicated funding that exists for many other natural disasters, wildfire response activities are funded through the Forest Service and Department of the Interior budgets. This means that the Forest Service must often transfer money from other funds in its budget to respond to wildfires. It is imperative that the Forest Service has a stable budget that provides the resources needed for its other work, such as managing roads and water quality to conserve fish and wildlife habitat, recreational opportunities, and more.

Despite working under uncomfortable and unpredictable conditions, the personnel that I have encountered handle my questions with grace. And while I was at the district office recently, a local man called to offer the pond on his property for helicopters to use for water.

This man understands the spirit of public lands management. That is, when it comes to our shared public lands, we must take care of them together. We must give the professionals and agencies the tools and information that they need to do their job, and avoid adding to their workload. Be diligent about any sources of ignition on your property. Don't throw cigarette butts out of your car window. Respect signs indicating that a road is closed for fire management, and if you see personnel and volunteers, thank them.

Finally, speak up in support of the men and women who work for the Forest Service. Write to your representatives in Congress and ask them to seek dedicated funding for wildfire response, so that the Forest Service may take care of our national forests for the benefit of us all.

Michelle Ruigrok

Nest Box Project will continue

While the biologists continue to analyze the data from the monitoring of your nest boxes, your committee wants to thank you for another year of continued support! We hope to have more to report in the next newsletter.

HPAS will continue this program once again in the spring of 2017. Please consider being a part of this ongoing Citizens Science project then.

Michelle Styring



HPAS hats for sale

HPAS has new hats to celebrate our chapter's 20th anniversary. These will be for sale for \$10 each at all chapter functions – stay tuned for our 2017 schedule.

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** As of January 1, 2017, after many years and countless hours of volunteering, Romney Bathurst, Michelle Styring, and Pat Strickland will rotate off of the board of directors. We are deeply grateful to them for their time, and hope that they continue to be involved with the chapter. Thank you for all that you have done for HPAS, Romney, Michelle and Pat!*



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