



The Mountain Warbler

Newsletter of the Highlands Plateau Audubon Society – February 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 . . .

HPAS Nest Project continues to grow better!

I am excited to report the beginning of a new and exciting phase of our chapter's history. As has been foreshadowed in previous newsletters, we have actually begun to collaborate with professional ornithologists from both Western Carolina University (WCU) and Young Harris College (YHC), in extreme north Georgia, on our ongoing nest box experiment program. We anticipate that this will increase our ongoing relationships with both WCU and YHC staff, while increasing the quality of the analysis that will be accomplished on nesting success in our nest boxes, plus serve as a tangible means to encourage interested students in bird-related, natural history studies.



Nest boxes take root at Young Harris College.

By Olga Milenkaya

Another set of similar but modified, platform boxes (essentially no hole at all), intended to attract Carolina Wrens (in addition to the Chickadees, Bluebirds, and House Wrens we have reported as common nest box tenants). I'm told they even have Brown-headed Nuthatches in Young Harris. Olya and her students will be monitoring these boxes and, among other goals, will try to determine if nests with fewer eggs and hatchlings survive better than do larger clutches. Olya and her students (and perhaps interested HPAS members?) plan to band nesting birds so individual birds can be followed in the future and determine which birds return to which boxes, etc.

Meanwhile, WCU graduate student Traci Balance, under the guidance of Dr. Barbara Ballentine, is planning to carefully monitor and analyze nesting results from the approximately 150 boxes that are already in place around the Highlands Plateau and Franklin areas during the upcoming nesting season. There will be an additional, smaller number of boxes that will be installed on the WCU campus, in part to generate further campus interest in our projects. It is hoped that Traci will be able to use the Highlands Biological Station as her home base for this analysis, thus further extending our community resource network. The WCU folks have access to small electronic "button" devices that can be hidden in nests to help monitor nesting activity. WCU also has a banding license, so there may be additional opportunities for HPAS members to contribute to relatively long-term analysis of the birds that call our boxes their homes. We should see a lot of Traci this spring and summer.

I can't stop before saying that part of the fun of this is that the people involved are such nice folks! And I think our collaborators genuinely appreciate, as do we, the opportunity to work together on projects that are mutually interesting to our chapter and to them. Hopefully, we will legitimately be able to say that HPAS is helping to stimulate student interest in field ornithology at

two regional academic centers. Not to mention the positive aspects of collaboration between two regional academic centers, and all that our chapter has to gain as contributors to honest-to-goodness research projects.

As I began, I think HPAS is entering a truly exciting new era in what we can contribute, not only to our own interest in local birds, but as partners in meaningful research that really ‘raises the bar’ beyond what we could ever hope to achieve on our own.

Russell Regnery

New Vice President

The New Year has begun, in synch with the HPAS administrative calendar, and that means that Mr. William (Bill) Peavey is officially now the new HPAS Vice President. Bill is taking over this role from Ms. Avary Doubleday whose many contributions and years of service to the chapter are renowned and who came to the end of her term-limit as a director, as described in the HPAS by-laws that Avary helped to write several years ago. Avary will continue to help with critical committee functions.

Bill’s willingness to step up and contribute to the chapter as an officer, as well as a director and Program Chairperson, is greatly appreciated by all those who value HPAS in our community. Thank you Bill!

Russell Regnery

Audubon’s Christmas Bird Count

The conservation of wild birds and their habitats is central to the mission of local, national and international Audubon groups. That stewardship begins with carefully monitoring bird populations and their available habitats. Toward that end, Audubon’s Christmas Bird Count or CBC is conducted each winter around Christmas, this year from December 14 to January 5.

This is truly a massive citizen science effort, in its 116th year, organized by the National Audubon Society in the U.S. and the Bird Studies group in Canada. This year projections were for 72,000 volunteers in over 2400 locations across the Western Hemisphere to count every bird seen or heard in 15-mile wide circles around local geographic points such as towns and cities. Last year, in 2014, 68 million birds were found evidencing 2106 species.

In the Highlands area, 22 hearty and determined birders associated with the Highlands Plateau Audubon Society met at the Kelsey-Hutchinson Park in Highlands at 7:30 a.m. on December 18 to conduct their own annual winter count. Teams of 3-5 set out in all directions. One team went west to the Turtle Pond area. Another team went south to Horse Cove and Rich Gap. Those north and easterly bound did their spotting at Flat Mountain, Chestnut Hill, Cold Spring and Cheney Lane. A fourth group surveyed areas in and immediately around town, including Sunset Rocks, the Highlands Biological Station and the town’s water treatment facility. The team leaders were Russ Regnery, Brock Hutchins, Cynthia Strain, Jack Johnston and Kyle Pursel. The organizer and official compiler was Brock Hutchins.

A total of 1,139 birds were observed and identified in this year’s CBC.

The species count was 38. These totals were consistent with CBCs in years past given the larger number of observers this year. Some species were present in abundance: 384 Dark-eyed Junco were sighted. Other multiple sightings were made of the American Robin (129), American Crow (112) and Carolina Chickadee (68). Seventy-five Wild Turkey, the bird Benjamin Franklin nominated to be the national bird, were seen. Other notable sightings include the American Goldfinch (51), Mallard (46), Northern Cardinal (38), Tufted Titmouse (29), and Song Sparrow (28). The full list of birds counted can be found at www.highlandsaudubonsociety.com.

This data will be fed into the huge database held by the National Audubon Society documenting avian conditions in the Western Hemisphere. This ongoing, longitudinal data base provides vital information about the changing numbers and changing habitats of birds: which species are thriving and which are dwindling or threatened by extinction; how habitats are changing given global warming, with what effects on bird populations; how migratory patterns and pathways are changing; and what can be done to protect and safeguard this vital aspect of our life-sustaining ecologies. The CBC database has been central to the recent Audubon Birds and Climate Report available at <http://climate.audubon.org/article/audubon-report-glance/>.

In addition to the long tradition of the citizen science, the Christmas Bird Count is one of those slightly wacky activities that brings friends together, many of whom we may not have seen in several months, under conditions that could easily be mistaken as less than optimal for birding. This year’s count took place in temperatures that rarely rose above freezing and the frigid temperatures were re enforced by a bone-chilling breeze. Birds and observers were all trying their best to stay warm; no one was heard to complain of

having too much in the way of warm clothing. It wasn't hard to identify with the plight of our avian subjects who, as often as not, were hunkered down on the sunny side of wherever, and hard to spot. At least the ground was ice-free and the sun felt good when it did appear.

The teams of observers had the important benefit of a traditional HPAS Christmas Bird Count group lunch consisting of hot chili and Kay Poole's famous cornbread recipe. Along with our usual list of suspect winter birders, this year's count was augmented by friends from Young Harris College, Western Carolina University, and the Highlands Biological Station/Foundation.

Perhaps as much as anything, the CBC is a winter 'bonding' exercise for birders who need a specific excuse for getting together when all other indications would suggest that staying home in front of the wood stove would have been the best idea!

William McReynolds and Russell Regnery



Ed Boos photo in 'Birds & Bloom'

HPAS' Ed Boos had a full-page picture in the Dec/Jan 2016 issue of "Birds & Blooms." They did a bonus section called "31 bird tales" featuring a different bird picture for each day of December. Ed's was one of five full-page photos and the picture for Dec. 25. The photo is of a mother Pileated Woodpecker and her three hungry chicks.

Show Your Support for the National Wildlife Refuge System



An easy way to further wildlife conservation throughout the country is to purchase a Federal Duck Stamp. While waterfowl hunters are required to purchase a stamp, anyone can participate in conservation by purchasing a stamp. Most of the purchase price or 98 percent goes directly to acquiring habitat to be set aside specifically for wildlife conservation. In this way all birds and other wildlife that use these lands can benefit.

Stamps can be purchased at refuges, sporting goods stores and online at USPS.

For more information, visit the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at <http://www.fws.gov/birds/get-involved/duck-stamp.php>.

Great Backyard Bird Count February 12 through February 15

The Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) is a free, fun, and easy event that engages bird watchers of all ages in counting birds to create a real-time snapshot of bird populations. Participants are asked to count birds for as little as 15 minutes (or as long as they wish) on one or more days of the four-day event and report their sightings online at birdcount.org. Anyone can take part in the Great Backyard Bird Count, from beginning bird watchers to experts, and you can participate from your backyard, or anywhere in the world. Each checklist submitted during the GBBC helps researchers at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the National Audubon Society learn more about how birds are doing, and how to protect them and the environment we share. Last year, more than 140,000 participants submitted their bird observations online, creating the largest instantaneous snapshot of global bird populations ever recorded.

The 19th annual GBBC will be held Friday, February 12, through Monday, February 15, 2016. Please visit the official website at birdcount.org for more information.

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
Michelle Styring, Nest Box Project
Glenda Zahner, Education
Pat Strickland, Communications

Newsletter Editor: Jessica Webb

Web Master: Jean McCormick



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