



# The Mountain Warbler

Newsletter of the Highlands Plateau Audubon Society – February 2014

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

We are fortunate to live in the midst of some rather special bird habitat. Much of our community resides within the Highlands Plateau Important Bird Area, a nationally recognized distinction, in which the towns of Cashiers and Highlands are both embedded. Several NC Birding Trails exist here as well. So it may be a natural thing to ask what we, as members of a small Audubon chapter, can do to further contribute to maintaining and enhancing our environment in ways that will ultimately benefit wildlife, especially birds?

Looking back at 2013, much of the HPAS emphasis continued to focus on education in one form or another. Many of us have come to appreciate that long-term education is a critical cornerstone for conservation. Under the leadership of Ann Campbell (our Education Chairperson) over 630 school-aged children were exposed to bird and bird habitat programs. HPAS has partnered with Blue Ridge School, Highlands School, and the Summit Charter School for various educational presentations and outings. HPAS is a co-sponsor of the outdoor learning facility at the Highlands Middle School. HPAS has also partnered with the Mountain Wildlife Days organization to help introduce scores of people to native wildlife.

Under the leadership of Brock Hutchins (our Outings Chairperson) HPAS sponsored over 20 weekly spring and summer trips designed to encourage both experienced and novice birders to become more familiar with the diversity of birds that can be found by exploring local environments with expert leaders. HPAS has shared responsibility of local bird outings with our partners at the Franklin Bird Club. The HPAS outings program has been recognized as one of the most ambitious of its kind within NC. Of course HPAS shares with Audubon chapters everywhere the tradition of the Christmas Bird Count, a one-day, mid-winter group effort to accurately record as many species as possible.

Don Shure (Programs Chairperson) once again helped to organize a very successful series of eleven intellectually stimulating evening programs with ornithological themes, which reached approximately 475 members of the public.

Kimberly Brand (Audubon North Carolina) was a featured speaker at the Highlands Biological Foundation's Native Plant Conference and reminded those in attendance of the importance of cultivating and preserving existing native plant species for the benefit of native bird species; a theme that HPAS has trumpeted for several seasons. (See page 4)

In order for the public to potentially benefit from HPAS-sponsored events there is an obvious need to communicate what is happening to the public and this is spearheaded by Avary Doubleday (Communications Chairperson and Vice President), Michelle Styring (primary media contact), John Gross (newsletter editor), and Jean McCormick (web-page administrator).

As HPAS enters the 2014 birding season we hope to maintain our commitment to multi-faceted educational activities. We also hope to sponsor a locally relevant 'citizen science' program to make bird boxes available with various sized entrance holes, so that our community can help determine whether there is a need to provide cavity-nesting places for birds that prefer smaller diameter entries (such as is the case in other areas with the Brown-headed Nuthatch). The success of Bluebird boxes in increasing the number of Bluebirds is clear 'proof of concept' that providing appropriate nesting cavities can make a significant difference in bird populations.

HPAS is currently taking steps to help sponsor and work with a University of Western Carolina graduate student and faculty to participate in efforts to document possible nesting habitat for Golden-winged Warblers in our area of the Southern Blue Ridge. Golden-winged Warblers have recently been listed as a potentially endangered species by the US Fish and Wildlife Service and as one of nine North American bird species identified as requiring special conservation focus.

The Highlands Plateau Audubon Society is a relatively small Audubon chapter that includes well-dispersed, small human communities. Historically, HPAS has generated modest operational funding through local membership contributions at varying levels. This funding strategy has left HPAS with a modest nest egg to work with, but not with funding levels appropriate for income-intensive activities; e.g., HPAS has not, at least until now, participated in fund raising for habitat restoration, sanctuary acquisition, etc. We plan to try to use our funds as wisely as possible in order to produce significant benefit to bird and bird habitat conservation.

If you are not already involved with the HPAS activities mentioned above, or any of the other chapter functions that require active membership participation, please contact us; there is lots of room to contribute, learn, and broaden the scope of HPAS potential, as well as enjoy the benefit of fellowship with a good group of people!

### **114th Christmas Bird Count**

Fourteen members and friends of HPAS participated in the CBC on December 15. During the day, four teams counted 1,031 birds of 45 species. Highlights were two Yellow-rumped Warblers seen on Turtle Pond Road, which are new to the Highlands count; and a flock of 16 Northern Cardinals in the early morning sunshine. The most numerous species were American Robins and Dark-eyed Juncos. The recap was done over a delicious chili lunch at Edwin and Kay Poole's. The full list is available on our web site ([highlandsaudubonsociety.org](http://highlandsaudubonsociety.org)). Mark your calendars and plan to be a part of this citizen science project next December!

## **Get Geared Up For the Great Backyard Bird Count!**

*National Audubon Society Press Release*

February 14–17, 2014. Anyone anywhere in the world can count birds for at least 15 minutes on one or more days of the count and enter their sightings at [www.BirdCount.org](http://www.BirdCount.org). The information gathered by tens of thousands of volunteers helps track the health of bird populations at a scale that would not otherwise be possible. The GBBC is a joint project of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the National Audubon Society with partner Bird Studies Canada.

“People who care about birds can change the world,” said Audubon chief scientist Gary Langham. “Technology has made it possible for people everywhere to unite around a shared love of birds and a commitment to protecting them.”

In North America, GBBC participants will add their data to help define the magnitude of a dramatic irruption of magnificent Snowy Owls. Bird watchers will also be on the lookout for the invasive Eurasian Collared-Dove to see if it has expanded its range again. GBBC observations may help show whether or not numbers of American Crows will continue to rebound after being hit hard by the West Nile virus and whether more insect-eating species are showing up in new areas, possibly because of changing climate.

Last year’s Great Backyard Bird Count shattered records after going global for the first time, thanks to integration with the eBird online checklist program launched in 2002 by the Cornell Lab and Audubon. Participants reported their bird sightings from all 7 continents, including 111 countries and independent territories. More than 34.5 million birds and 3,610 species were recorded—nearly one-third of the world’s total bird species documented in just four days.

“This is a milestone for citizen science in so many respects—number of species, diversity of countries involved, total participants, and number of individual birds recorded. We hope this is just the start of something far larger, engaging the whole world in creating a detailed annual snapshot of how all our planet’s birds are faring as the years go by,” said Cornell Lab director Dr. John Fitzpatrick.

“Canadian participation in the Great Backyard Bird Count has increased tremendously in recent years, and it’s wonderful to see this program growing globally,” said Bird Studies Canada President Dr. George Finney. “The count is introducing unprecedented numbers of people to the exciting field of bird watching.”

The Great Backyard Bird Count is a great way for people of all ages and backgrounds to connect with nature and make a difference for birds. It’s free and easy. To learn more about how to join the count visit [www.birdcount.org](http://www.birdcount.org) and view the winning photos from the 2013 GBBC photo contest.

You can participate whether you are in Highlands or your winter home!

## **eBird Alerts**

Take a look at the birding information available at [www.ebird.org](http://www.ebird.org). A real-time, online checklist program, eBird has revolutionized the way that the birding community reports and accesses information about birds. Launched in 2002 by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and National Audubon Society, eBird provides rich data sources for basic information on bird abundance and distribution at a variety of spatial and temporal scales.

eBird's goal is to maximize the utility and accessibility of the vast numbers of bird observations made each year by recreational and professional bird watchers. It is amassing one of the largest and fastest growing biodiversity data resources in existence. For example, in March 2012, participants reported more than 3.1 million bird observations across North America!

The observations of each participant join those of others in an international network of eBird users. eBird then shares these observations with a global community of educators, land managers, ornithologists, and conservation biologists. In time these data will become the foundation for a better understanding of bird distribution across the western hemisphere and beyond.

Even if you don't want to record your own information, you can sign up for and receive notices of unusual birds in your area by visiting the My eBird tab and signing up for alerts. The link for North Carolina Alerts is: <http://ebird.org/ebird/alert/summary?sid=SN35561>

### **HPAS Joins Founders Park Coalition to Complete Park**

*Submitted by Bill Peavey, HPAS Representative*

The effort to complete the five year old plans for The Pine Street/Kelsey Hutchinson Park in Highlands, is being spearheaded by Nick Bazan and the Founders Park Coalition. I have agreed to represent Highlands Plateau Audubon Society on the committee. We have had two weekly meetings bookending the very successful presentation to the Highlands Town Council in mid-January.

The coalition consists of representatives of several interest groups in addition to our own: The Highlands Chamber, Highlands Cashiers Land Trust, the Biological Station, Highlands Rotary Club, Mountaintop Rotary, Mountain Garden Club, The Laurel Garden Club, the Highlands Historical Society, the Greenway folks and several others.

The goal is to have more than just a plot of grass: a pavilion-stage, picnic areas, and most importantly to us, serious landscaping. I have volunteered to work with Hank Ross, the landscape architect who had created the original plans. Our goal, which coincides perfectly with that of the Land Trust, is that the plantings be native. These will attract native insects which in turn will attract birds. Gary Wein illustrated it well for me with a question, "Have you ever noticed that some holly bushes keep their red berries all season? That's because they are the wrong ones and do not interest our birds."

Our immediate goal is to begin fundraising. The target is \$430,000. This is to be funded privately, but the town will be maintaining the park after completion, so it was necessary to first obtain the town council's blessing. We hope to encourage matching gifts such as that which recently worked for the Hudson Library. I encouraged naming specific material gifts, which we are working on. However, the group is agreed that it does not want to forfeit control to any large donor. So we smaller participants will certainly be welcomed. All donations will have the advantage of being tax deductible .

The project will go in phases. After getting the present property set up and planted, we hope to raise the street level with pavers, so that the present lot will extend visually across the street to include the little amphitheater on the Macon Bank property. Pine Street will still remain open to traffic, and there will be no loss of parking except during events such as CraigFest and the Motoring Festival.

### **Membership**

We do not have any new members to report since our December newsletter, but I would like to remind everyone that our year runs from May 1 to April 30. You can expect to receive a renewal form in the mail sometime in April.

If you have any friends interested in joining HPAS, please let them know that they can download an application on the internet ([www.highlandsaudubonsociety.org](http://www.highlandsaudubonsociety.org)) or call me and I will mail them one (743-7421). Any new members joining now will have their membership be good through April, 2015. If they are not sure they are interested in joining our group, invite them to join us this coming season for our Saturday walks or evening programs as your guest. This will give them a better understanding of what we are all about.

REMEMBER: Our organization is only as strong as our membership.

*Pat Strickland*

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