



# The Mountain Warbler

Newsletter of the Highlands Plateau Audubon Society – October 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 Sequel to an HPAS Turtle Tale

As some of you know, I've become involved with a loggerhead sea turtle nest-monitoring project on Little Cumberland Island (LCI), off the Georgia coast. At a recent HPAS evening program, I spoke about some of the things I've learned and several of the things I still wonder about with regard to the wonders of sea turtle nesting behavior. The endangered loggerhead sea turtles (far and away the predominant sea turtle on the Georgia coast) only come ashore to nest at night. Earlier in the summer, we strive to identify new nests every morning by looking for the mother turtles' tracks on the fresh sand, indicating where she has emerged from and returned to the sea. We then try to help to protect those nests from predators such as raccoons, pigs, and coyotes, and subsequently (e.g., about 55 days later,) check to see how many of the eggs survive to hatch and emerge. The activities of the LCI Sea Turtle Project are part of a much larger, regional sea turtle management plan now organized by National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the GA-DNR, and the Georgia Sea Turtle Cooperative.

During the September HPAS program, I mentioned that I had been fortunate to witness a nest of hatchling turtles gallantly attempting to march to the sea, past the gauntlet of menacing sea gulls and ghost crabs after the sun had risen. The turtles' nest was somewhat notable in that the mother's original nesting activity had previously escaped detection during our daily, early morning turtle patrols so this nest had been, up until that morning, un-marked and unprotected. Failure to initially detect a nest can occur for a variety of reasons, for example, when a mother loggerhead sea turtle completes the nesting process and returns to the sea before an incoming high tide can virtually obliterate her tracks on the beach. This year there were approximately five such 'undetected' nests, which were only identified after the hatchlings emerged, out of 106 total sea turtle nests on the island.

On the morning of this particular hatching emergent event, a couple of interested passersby helped to keep most of the local sea gulls at bay and several hatchlings were rescued from the mouths of local ghost crabs burrows. Ghost crabs are quite the terror of the beach for something the size of a hatchling sea turtle, approximately the size of a silver dollar, trying to make their way to the relative safety of the water's edge. As part of an ongoing analysis of DNA identification of nesting turtles, I took a tissue sample from one unlucky hatchling that had already been killed by a ghost crab. Photographs of live hatchlings entering the sea had been taken and the people involved, including me, were quite pleased to have been lucky enough to witness a relatively successful emergence of hatchlings, by light of day. And that's where the story, as told to the HPAS gathering three weeks ago, ended...or so I thought.

**Sequel:** Subsequent to the daytime hatching event and to the HPAS sea turtle program, I had an email from Dr. Brian Shamblin, an ecologist/herpetologist at UGA. Brian analyses the DNA from sea turtle tissue samples and from the trace amounts of maternal DNA that are left on the surface of freshly laid turtle eggs. The purpose of Brian's email was to share the news that the tissue that had been submitted for DNA analysis from the unlucky dead hatchling, mentioned above, was from a critically endangered Kemp's Ridley sea turtle (often referred to as the "rarest sea turtle in the world"), not the otherwise threatened and endangered, but otherwise relatively 'routine' loggerhead sea turtle we experience on the Georgia coast! This was the first and only (as far as I know) documented Kemp's-Ridley nest on the Georgia coast this year. Interestingly, LCI also recorded Georgia's only Kemp's Ridely nest in 2015 as well. However, that nest was tragically completely destroyed by coyotes. We know from Brian Shamblin's DNA analysis that the two Kemp's Ridley turtles that nested, or tried to nest, on LCI in 2015 and 2016 were genetically not identical (i.e., not the same turtle).

The Kemp's Ridley sea turtle was only relatively recently described as a species. The entire nesting population of this species "became known to science" only in 1947 on essentially one stretch of beach, near Rancho Nuevo, Mexico,

about 250 miles south of the border with Texas. And that population was rapidly heading towards the brink of apparent extinction. Since the 1960s, Mexican authorities have instituted strict protection measures for nesting Kemp's Ridley sea turtles and a smaller breeding population has been transplanted to Padres Island, on the Texas coast.

This species is very susceptible to human predation since the female turtles nest during the day, instead of at night, and typically, multiple females come out to nest at the same time on the same beach. It is my amateur naturalist guess/hypothesis that at one time this species must have enjoyed a wider nesting distribution than only one beach in Mexico, and that human predation, perhaps for hundreds or even thousands of years, may have played a significant role in diminishing the recognized nesting distribution for the species.

[The fact that this species deposit their nests during the day probably explains why the 2016 Little Cumberland Island Kemp's Ridley nest initially went undetected; we routinely patrol for those turtles that cross the high tide line during the night. Any adult female turtle tracks that might be left during the day could easily go unrecognized by the next morning.]

Kemp's Ridley sea turtles are apparently very good about returning to the same beach to nest from which they originally hatched; they have very "high nest site fidelity." So what's with the two successive nest attempts on LCI, thousands of miles from their well-known Mexican nesting site and almost as far from Texas?

I can think of two possible explanations, one perhaps more traditional explanation and the other much more fun to consider. 1.) Traditional: Now that Kemp's Ridley sea turtles have been transplanted to Texas, and the population of the species appears to be increasing in Mexico as well, it could be suggested that there is something specific about the LCI beach that attracts "founder" (necessarily both male and female) Kemp's Ridley sea turtle individuals that are for some reason exploring new breeding/nesting territories. This perhaps is the simplest explanation but doesn't jive with the apparent extreme nest site fidelity for which Kemp's Ridley's are best known. 2.) Exciting alternative: It seems potentially credible to me that the nests on LCI might represent a very, very tenuous connection to a breeding population of Kemp's Ridley sea turtles that once was more common on the Georgia coast, but perhaps went unrecognized, and which was nearly exterminated except for a few long-lived individuals that have continued to sneak in and deposit an undetected nest every few years and persist as a very unique, relic population!

Either the 'founder' or the 'relic' explanations for the Kemp's Ridley sea turtle nests on LCI are exciting from a species conservation perspective. It will be most interesting to keep a look-out for additional day-time nesting Kemp's Ridley sea turtles on the Atlantic coast within the next few years. And it is within reason to hope that this year's successful Kemp's Ridley sea turtle nest on LCI will be part of a nexus for a resurgent breeding population on the Atlantic coast, perhaps to be manifested 15-30 years from now when perhaps one or two of the hatchlings I was so lucky to have witnessed striding towards the sea might return to nest on the same island...assuming that the island will still be there to welcome them back.

*Russell Regnery*

## **Birding on the Blue Ridge Parkway**



**Front from left: George Kaye, Pat Davis, Hugh Dargan, Paige Engelbrekton, Mary Palmer, Sheila Peavey, Pat Strickland, Mary Lane Johnson, Bill Peavey; Top: Audrey Schmidt-Davis, Linda McReynolds, and Brock Hutchins.**

On Saturday, September 17, a group of sleepy but enthusiastic HPAS birders met at 7 a.m. in Highlands and set out with high hopes on the annual Charlie Davis Memorial Blue Ridge Parkway Outing. Rendezvousing with other chapter birders at the Haywood County Rest Area, the group of 16 queued up and traveled caravan style on the Parkway towards Asheville.

Proceeding through an elevation change from 3,915 to over 6,000 feet, the birding stops included the Standing Rock Overlook, Steestachee Bald, Grassy Ridge Mine Overlook, Doubletop Mountain, Roy Taylor Forest Overlook, Richland Balsam Overlook, Haywood-Jackson Overlook and Beartrail Ridge Overlook. The Parkway picnic lunch included well appreciated cookies baked by Pat Strickland.

The effort was well rewarded with many bird sightings ranging across 27 species. Those included Cape May Warblers, Cedar Waxwings, American Goldfinch, Blackburnian Warblers, Tennessee Warblers, Rufus-sided Towhees, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, a Red-tailed Hawk and a Broad-

winged Hawk. At the last stop, Devil's Courthouse, a Peregrine Falcon was seen through the spotting scope.

Brock Hutchins led this successful outing. Words of wonderment and beauty were uttered by all. Audrey Schmidt-Davis, the 9-year-old granddaughter of Pat Davis, sighted the only Red-bellied Woodpecker and had a grand time but allowed that the day certainly began early.

*William McReynolds*

## **Results from the Nest Box Project for 2015-2016**

With over 150 nest boxes placed on the Plateau and in our surrounding communities by the HPAS Nest Box Committee, we can now report on some of the results from this year's nesting season.

Carolina Chickadees had 42 successful broods and might have been successful in another 10 nest boxes. Eastern Bluebirds had 20 successful broods and 4 other possible successes. House Wrens had 23 successful broods and 3 additional possible successes. Tree Swallows were successful 8 times with 4 other possible successes. Tufted Titmice had 2 successful broods.

In total, then, we are confident that our nest boxes housed 95 avian families, with less conclusive evidence of another 21 families. These are impressive numbers. This year, the Tree Swallows and Tufted Titmice were new to our boxes as compared with last year's cavity dwellers.

These observations are independent of what Traci Ballence the Western Carolina University graduate student, found during her study of Carolina Chickadees. We hope to learn more about her findings in 2017. She is busy analyzing data from the I-buttons that she installed in many of the boxes housing Carolina Chickadees.

The Nest Box Committee will meet in November to decide how to proceed with this project for the next nesting season. Stay tuned. Please send any comments or suggestions to [Msty30005@aol.com](mailto:Msty30005@aol.com).

In the meantime, we hope that those who participated in the study know just how important they were to the results, and that all are pleased with the outcome of this year's efforts. Many thanks!

*Michelle Styring*

## **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. 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 not participated in the Christmas Bird Count or CBC before, 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 2400 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. A shocking 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. Email Brock Hutchins at [brockhutchins@bellsouth.net](mailto:brockhutchins@bellsouth.net) for more information or to join the effort.

*William McReynolds*

## HPAS directors

At the HPAS Annual Membership Business Meeting, September 26, Ms. Mary Palmer Dargan (Cashiers), Dr. Olga Milenkaya (Young Harris), and Dr. Jeremy Hyman (Cullowhee) were announced as candidates for HPAS Directors and we so endorsed unanimously by those attending the meeting. The official terms of the Directors-elect will begin January 1, 2017. Welcome new directors; you will be an important part of the future of HPAS!

*Russell Regnery*

## Membership Renewals

We are so grateful to all who have renewed and joined this year! Your membership donation helps to support our local educational programs, birding field trips, newsletters, and local projects. Thank you for helping our local chapter continue to thrive!

We have had two new memberships. Please welcome our new members!

Hugh and Mary Palmer Dargan

Ross and Susie Henderson

## Membership List

Special thanks to all our Local Chapter members. Your generous support of our growing organization has provided funding for expanded activities in our mountain community. The list reflects payments received through September 14, 2016.

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