Gulls By Golly!!!

At least once every winter I am asked “What at those sea gulls doing at the shopping center?” or “Why are there sea gulls in Charlotte?” I try to explain to folks first that there is not such bird as a ‘sea’ gull. There are ring-billed, laughing, herring and many types of gulls. Most which like to be around water but not necessarily ‘seas’. One thing all the gulls have in common is they like flat, wide open spaces. And from a bird’s point of view a shopping center parking lot is a perfect ‘beach’ or resting place. They can see predators easily and they can also keep track of what their neighbor has found to eat.

From a beginning birder’s view point gulls and terns all look a like. But looks can be deceptive. We have three gull species seen regularly in the Charlotte area. Do you know what they are and how to identify them? If you go to beach over the holiday you can run into a few more gulls and several terns. To complicate matters it takes most gulls two to four years to develop their adult plumage. They also have different winter and summer plumages. So how do you determine what species you are looking at?

That’s what Taylor Pephoff and Don Serif are going to discuss at the December meeting. They will help you determine what gulls you are seeing here in Charlotte by discussing plumages, habitats, and habits. They will also show us some of the more unusual gulls to look for when you are at the coast in the winter. Especially, out at the outer banks.

So don’t miss this informative presentation, Thursday, December 4th at 7:30 PM in the Fellowship Hall of the Sharon Seventh Day Adventist Church [920 Sharon Amity].

A Bird in the Hand

For the past two years, the Division of Natural Resources has operated a fall bird banding station at Reedy Creek Nature Preserve. This effort to document and monitor bird populations utilizing County nature preserves during fall migration supplements our long-term point counts, nest surveys, and bird banding operations during the spring and summer. This fall session was phenomenal - we opened nets on nine mornings and had 190 total captures and banded 169 birds comprised of 34 different species. Five new species were banded including Hooded Warbler, Cape May Warbler, Tennessee Warbler, Brown Creeper, and Yellow-shafted Flicker. Bird banding is an extremely useful and harmless technique that is used by biologists worldwide to document survivorship, reproduction, and population trends. Locally, we use the data to identify landscape-level management actions and strategies to reduce negative population trends and maintain stable or increasing populations of our native bird species. For more information, contact our Conservation Science Office at 704-432-1391.
FIELD TRIPS
CHRISTMAS COUNTS

Saturday, December 13th
Wintering Waterfowl

Coddle Creek Reservoir has become the place to see waterfowl in the Charlotte area. Although there are several other spots we will check as well. Hopefully, the weather up north will be co-operative this year and push the ducks our way. This trip will be a warm up for the numerous Christmas counts later. We will meet at 8 AM at the McDonalds at University Place and will return about 12:30 PM. If you would like to join the group contact Taylor Piephoff at 704-532-6336.

Saturday, December 20th
Gaston Christmas Count

For many animals the Catabaw River can act as a barrier. Only the heartiest mammal will attempt to swim across the river. Birds, however, are not as easily intimidated. And birders shouldn't be phased by the river either. That's why we are teaming up with the birders from the Gastonia area to conduct the Gaston County Christmas Count. This will be a great opportunity to get to know our neighbors and explore new birding hots. All the details haven't been worked out yet but plan to spend at least a morning if not the entire day getting to know Gaston County. If you are interested in starting a new tradition contact Judy Walker [704-537-8181 or birdwalker@mac.com] or Tony Goff [704-829-5040 or Rangerman87B@aol.com].

Sunday, December 21
Lake Norman Xmas Count

This is hands down the best count circle in the Piedmont. Because of the wide variety of habitat — open fields, large lake, small ponds, wetlands, mixed hardwood forest, old farms — the potential for unusual birds is great. In some ways this count is like a tour through Peterson's guide with a smattering of species from loons all the way through to the sparrows with representatives of almost everything in between.

Groups will start before dawn to catch the owls and woodcocks. Others will meet at 7:00 AM. There are fast food places in the count circle (in Cornelius) but you may want to bring food to munch on for energy and warmth. Although you might spend a fair amount of time in the car, warm clothes and sturdy shoes are a must. A tally up dinner will be held at 5:30 PM. Contact Taylor Piephoff at 704-532-6336 or PiephoffT@aol.com for specific assignments.

Saturday, December 27th:
Charlotte Christmas Count

The granddaddy of the counts, going all the back to 1941, this circle still encompasses a surprising variety of habitat considering suburban sprawl which has taken over much of the area. There are still patches of woods, ponds, lakes, streams and open fields which turn up a interesting variety of resident and wintering species.

In the last 5 years we have averaged around 90 species. A remarkable number considering the wholesale lost of habitat over the past 20 years which just proves the tenacity of the birds.

Although this is an all day event if you can only participate in the morning or afternoon you are more than welcome.

Since fast food establishments (and warmth) will be just around the corner packing a lunch is optional although a thermos of coffee never hurt. There will be a tally up dinner at Wing Haven 5:30 PM [check the web site for directions]. Just bring your appetites and good birding stories. Too assure even and complete coverage of the area those who wish to participate should contact Wayne Covington at 704-362-1774.
Saturday, January 3rd: Pee Dee NWR Count

The Pee Dee Christmas Count is a great way to start the new year birding. Every year it produces surprises. One year it was turkey tracks in the snow and lots of sparrows. Another sight to behold is seeing the ducks take off in the morning or watching them come back in at dusk. Because of the wide variety of habitat and its central location we usually have a pretty good list of birds including Bald Eagles, Tundra Swans, and lots and lots of sparrows and ducks.

If you want to carpool, meet at the McDonalds on Independence and Idlewild at 5:45 AM. Otherwise meet at the Pee Dee Maintenance Building [at the main entrance off Rt. 52] at 7 AM. Lunch will be provided but you will want to wear lots of layers and bring snack foods and something hot to drive while you are out in the field. If you want to be part of this exciting count contact Judy Walker [704-537-8181 or birdwalker@mac.com].

Saturday, January 17th: Huntington Beach St. Park, SC

Although January is often cold and dreary, Mecklenburg Audubon Society’s annual field trip to Huntington Beach State Park in South Carolina is always well worth braving the elements! A walk down the beach to the jetty can be cold and windy but you’ll most likely get to see gannets, piping plovers and sometimes a flock of snow buntings! We can expect to see lots of ducks, shore birds and hopefully a few rare species like longspurs, eiders or long-tailed ducks.

Warm clothes and lunch are a must. Since most participants stay for the weekend, we will plan to go out to dinner on Saturday night. At dinner we will plan where we will go on Sunday. A favorite and inexpensive Mom & Pop motel in Murrel's Inlet is the Brookwood Inn - 843-651-2550. If you have questions or plan to go contact Taylor Piephoff [704-532-6336 or PiephoffT@aol.com].

Owl Prowl

December 13 from 6:00 - 7:30 p.m. - Join Mecklenburg Park and Recreation Dept. at Latta Plantation Nature Center to learn more about owls. Early winter is a time when most birds are concerned with finding food or flying south to more hospitable climates. Owls have more important things to do, such as mating and establishing nesting sites. During this evening exploration we will survey the area for owls using calls, as well as checking nest boxes. We will then compile our data and talk about possible conclusions we can make from our data. Please dress for the weather, bring a flashlight, and wear sturdy shoes. Ages 8+. Cost is $3/adult, $2/child. Ages 15 and under must be accompanied by an adult. Call 704-875-1391 to register.

Board Members

Judy Walker - President
704-537-8181
birdwalker@mac.com

Rob Bierregaard - Vice President
704-333-2405
rbierreg@email.uncc.edu

Larry Barden - Secretary
704-547-4059
larry@lbarden.com

Lucy Quintilliano - Treasurer
704-364-9028
LucyAQ@aol.com

Taylor Piephoff - Field Trips
704-532-6336
piephoffT@aol.com

Wayne Covington - Bird Count
704-362-1774
WayneCovington@hotmail.com

Marek Smith - Membership
704-875-1391
maresmit@aol.com

Louise Barden - Publicity
704-535-6385
louise@lbarden.com

Andrea Owens - Hospitality

Mecklenburg Audubon is a chapter of National Audubon. Meetings are held at Sharon Seventh Day Adventist Church, 920 N. Sharon Amity Rd. on the first Thursday of each month, September – May at 7:30 PM.

To the Sea, to the Sea!
The white gulls are crying,
The wind is blowing, and the white foam is flying.

-Legolas’ Song of the Sea
(The Lord of the Rings, J.R.R. Tolkien)
The routine abundance of gulls makes a convenient excuse for ignoring them. No other group of birds presents so many subtle identification problems or such an array of overlapping plumages. There are more plumage variations within most gull species than there are between species. The first-winter herring, for instance, looks more like the first-winter versions of western, lesser blacked-backed, California, Thayer’s and several others than it does an adult herring.

Gull sizes and silhouettes, are only moderately useful as guides to identification. Sorting out the plumages is essential, and this is one part of birding that seems to get harder with experience.

The first thing to realize about gull plumages is that no general field guide illustrates them all. All gulls have five to nine distinct plumages, not counting periods of transition or racial or individual variations.

The second thing to realize about gull plumages is that there’s no avoiding the lingo. Anyone interested in mastering the gulls must adjust to the gull specialists’ categories: ‘two-year gulls,’ ‘three-year gulls,’ first-winter plumage, ‘second-summer plumage,’ and so on.

Sorting gull plumages begins with a straightforward principle: the number of plumages increases with the size of the bird. Small gulls, for example Bonaparte’s, are two-year gulls and have five plumages. Midsized gull, for example laughing and ring-billed, are three-year gulls and have seven plumages. Large gulls, for example herring and greater black-backed, are four-year gulls and have nine plumages. There are no ‘one-year’ gulls or ‘five-year’ gulls.

The general progression is from a muted (often brown) juvénal plumage through a series of increasingly less motley intermediate plumages to the cleaner, crisper colors of the adult plumages.

**Juvenile:** The juvénal plumage is worn by all gulls from the time they leave their nest until late summer or early fall. Generally, it is the least important plumage to study, since most gulls molt their juvénal plumage before migrating. You will see juvénal-plumaged gulls regularly only if the species nests in your area. [Such as the laughing gull along the Carolina coast.]

**First Winter:** The first-winter plumage is very important to learn and is the subadult plumage most often illustrated in the field guides. It is acquired in late summer or early fall of the gull’s year of birth, and worn until the following spring. First-winter gulls are almost always more numerous than gulls in other non-adult plumages and frequently out number adults. In fact, if a gull occurs only as an autumn or winter stray in your area, knowing the first-winter plumage is more important than knowing the adult’s. Vagrant gulls are most likely to be ‘lost’ first-winter wanderers.

**First Summer:** The term ‘first summer’ may seem confusing, since the plumage of a gull’s initial summer of life is its juvénal plumage. A gull in first-summer plumages is in its second year of life. In most three-year and four-year gulls, first-summer plumage is hard to distinguish from first-winter plumage.

**Second Winter and Second Summer:** Since two-year gulls achieve their adult-winter plumage in their second winter and breeding plumage in their second summer the terms ‘second winter,’ ‘second summer,’ are used only with reference to three- and four-year gulls. As three-year gulls move into their second-winter plumages, they gain more adultlike wings. Four-year gulls in second-summer plumages often show a telltale mark. Most of the bird is obviously subadult: the wings are smudgy or spotted; the tail is banded; the bill lacks the adult’s red spot. But the back (or ‘saddle’) is the color of the adult’s back.

**Third Winter and Third Summer:** These terms are used with reference only to four-year gulls. All smaller gulls have reached adult plumage by their third year. Four-year gulls in their third-year plumages resemble adults except at each end – the tail and the tip of the bill. The tails generally still show bands or smudges of darkness, and the bills often retain some dark color and lack the adult’s red spot. The wings also tend to be less cleanly marked than the wings of full adults.
With Christmas right around the corner here are a few suggestions for the birderwatcher or budding naturalist on your list.


Beginner’s guide to Dragonflies. Blair Nikula and Jackie Sones. Little, Brown. 2002

Two excellent, small books from the Stokes Nature series. Both have excellent illustrations to help you organize your identification efforts. The photographs are clear, sharp and very helpful. The shore birds are shown in breeding, winter and juvenal plumages. Basic information about breeding habits, migration routes and behavior is included for each species discussed. The dragonfly book has an wonderfull introduction to the insects anatomy and natural history. A must for that box of ID books you have in your car.


Although an older book this is a great introduction to birding by habitat. It was one of the first birding books that I read [other than field guides] and I still refer to it. McElroy basically goes through the various habitats that one might encounter while birding east of the rockies and describes what birds would be found in the habitat, when they would occur there and why. This information is really helpful to a beginning birder when trying to identify a new species.


By conservative estimates, about seven million Americans are ‘fairly interested birders’. This book is aimed at the 95 percent of them who want to become better birders. It takes the reader by the hand, leads them into the field, and shows step-by-step what to do - and what not to do - to improve their birding skills. Connor covers everything from choosing and using binoculars to birding by ear. It tells how to adjust their approach to the seasons, to find and identify birds during winter and summer as well as during the spring and fall migrations. It explains how to master the most difficulty and popular groups of birds by applying a knowledge of bird habits, habitats and keey features to break them down into manageable subgroups. This is a must book for anyone who wants to improve their birding skills. [See Gulls 101 for an excerpt from this book.]

**Gulls 101 Cont.**

**ADULT WINTER:** To separate adult-winter plumage from breeding plumage, study the heads. The hooded gulls [Bonaparte’s and laughing] and the kitiwakes have ear patches or partial hoods in adult winter plumage. Most other gulls in adult-winter plumage have streaky or spotted heads.

**ADULT BREEDING:** This plumage is achieved by two-year gulls in their fifth plumage, as they are nearing two years of age; by three-year gulls in their seventh plumage, as they are nearing three years of age; and by four-year bulls in their ninth plumage, as they near four years of age. All gulls have easily recognized breeding plumages. One simple and excellent double-check for adult gulls at all seasons is the tail. Except for the Heermann’s gull, all North American gulls have bright white tails in both adult plumages.

Once a gull has reached full adulthood, its plumage alternates between adult winter and breeding adult for the rest of its life. All feather are renewed at least once annually, and plumage cannot be used to estimate age. Twenty-year-old gulls are indistinguishable from five-year-olds.

[This is an excerpt from Jack Connor’s The Complete Birder: A Guide to Better Birding. He goes into detail on how to distinguish between the individual species.]
## What's Inside?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monthly Meeting</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bird In Hand</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field Trips</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gulls 101</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book Nook</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Activities Calendar

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thu. 12/4</td>
<td>By Golly, Gulls [Monthly Meeting]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sat. 12/13</td>
<td>Area Waterfowl [1/2 day field trip]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sat. 12/20</td>
<td>Gaston County Christmas Count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sun. 12/21</td>
<td>Lake Norma Christmas Count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sat. 12/17</td>
<td>Charlotte Christmas Count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sat. 1/3</td>
<td>Pee Dee Christmas Count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thu. 1/8</td>
<td>Eat, Drink and travel to Texas [Monthly Meeting]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sat. 1/17</td>
<td>Huntington Beach St. Park, SC [All Day Field Trip]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sat. 1/30</td>
<td>Carolina Bird Club Weekend</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For additional activities and information go to [http://meckbirds.org](http://meckbirds.org)