Volume 12, Issue 3
November 2006

**Hawk Identification**

Generally when we think of winter migrants sparrows, kinglets and juncos come to mind. However, there are another set of birds that appear to be more abundant in our area in the winter - hawks. Or at least it seems that they are more abundant because we see more of them as we drive along our backroads and highways. Certainly birds from further north do push into our area to add to our resident population and leafless trees make them more visible. But do we really know what species of hawk we are looking at? Is it a Cooper's or Sharp-shinned? A Red-tailed or Red-shouldered? Or is something more unusual - a Rough-legged perhaps? Red-tails in particular can be troublesome since they vary greatly in plumage from area to area.

Betty O’Leary, from the Carolina Raptor Center, will be at our November meeting to help us unravel the mysteries of hawk identification. She’ll help us understand what are the important field marks for identifying both our common species as well as a few not so common ones.

So soar on over to the fellowship hall of the Sharon Seventh Day Adventist Church at 7:30 PM on Thursday, November 2nd to bone up on your hawk identification skills.
All Mecklenburg Audubon Field Trips are free and open to the public. Directions for all trips can be found on the Mecklenburg Audubon website - meckbirds.org. Click on Field Trips. Please remember to contact the trip leaders several days before the trip. If you don’t, you may not receive information about last minute changes or cancellations. Also, if they don’t know you are coming, they might leave without you!!

Saturday - November 4th: Six Mile Creek Greenway
1/2 Day Field Trip

Six Mile Creek Greenway, located in the southern corner of the county just this side of the south Carolina line, is a lightly used 1/2 mile paved stretch wandering thru creek side bottomlands.

Join fellow MAS member Dennis Lankford for an Autumn walk down its length in each of early winter arrival or late Fall migrants. Time permitting, we may also explore a portion of nearby Lower Mcalpine Creek Greenway. This little birded greenway has yielded olive-sided flycatcher, black billed cuckoo, and swainsons warbler in addition to the regular habitants.

We will meet at 8 AM in the greenway parking lot. To reach the greenway take Johnston Rd. (Rt. 521) south from the I-485 & Johnston interchanges, past Lowes Food on the left to Audrey Kell Rd. at light. L on Audrey Kell to Marvin Rd. R on Marvin-Greenway sign will be on your right about 1 mile down Marvin.

If you are interested in participating in this field trip contact Dennis at 704-541-6909 or harecubed2@carolina.rr.com.

Thursday - November 9th: Landsford Canal State Park
1/2 Day Field Trip

Lansford Canal State Park, located along a stretch of the Catawba River in Eastern Chester County, has three miles of trails following an old towpath canal, dug circa 1820, to circumvent the rapids in the river. One of my favorite local scenic parks, this area is outstanding for migratory birds in the spring, but is also productive in the slower winter months.

Meet at the main parking lot at 8:30 AM. We should be done by 1 PM, but this is a great place to picnic, so bring a lunch and hang around longer if you like.

Take I-77 south from Charlotte to Exit 77- [US 21 & Rt. 5]. Go south on US 21 about 15 miles to road 321, watch for sign on left. Turn left on 321 and go 1.3 miles to park entrance on the left and proceed to parking area. There is a small park use fee with envelopes provided. If going, contact Dave Lovett at 704-507-7677 or birdsalot@webtv.net.

Sunday - November 12th: Pee Dee National Wildlife Refuge
Full Day Field Trip

One never knows what you might encounter on a field trip to Pee Dee but we should see the vanguard of waterfowl, wintering sparrows and perhaps some lingering migrants. There’s always the probability of eagles and red-headed woodpeckers.

There will be a fair amount of easy walking so wear comfortable shoes. We will eat on the refuge so remember to bring a lunch, snacks and plenty of water.

We will meet at the McDonalds at Windsor Square [Independence Blvd.] at 7:30 AM. If you are going on the trip contact Judy Walker at 704-537-8181 or birdwalker@mac.com.

Continued on page 3
**Tuesday - November 14th: McDowell Prairie**

1/2 Day Field Trip

This morning we will explore the McDowell Prairie restoration site, looking for sparrows or other grassland birds that have arrived for the winter.

Unusual but unconfirmed bird sighting such as short-eared owl, dickcissel, and other rare sparrows abound as this prairie habitat has improved. Ground dove, grasshopper sparrow, kestrel, and shrike are all possible.

We will meet at the Nature Center in McDowell Park at 8:30 AM and carpool to the prairie as parking is limited. If going contact Dave Lovett at 704-507-7677 or birdsalot@webtv.net.

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**Saturday - November 18th: Reed Creek Nature Preserve**

1/2 Day Field Trip

This Saturday morning we explore, with the assistance of Lenny Lampel, a Parks and Rec naturalist, another of the county’s nature preserves. Reedy Creek Nature Preserve encompasses approximately 727 acres with 10 miles of trails offering hikers and nature enthusiasts the opportunity to explore a variety of terrains while enjoying scenic views of the small lakes, forests, fields, and streams.

The nature preserve’s rolling topography includes mixed pine and hardwood forests, open fields, three lakes, and the headwaters and two tributaries of Reedy Creek. It preserves habitat for 109 species of birds, 15 species of mammals, 20 species of reptiles, and 12 species of amphibians. This time of the year it harbors many wintering birds including hermit thrush, winter wren, brown creeper, sapsucker, and kinglets all which should have arrived and be ready for us to uncover.

If you can join us for this 1/2 day venture, meet at the Nature Center at 8 AM but please contact Dave Lovett at 704-507-7677 or birdsalot@webtv.net to let him know you are coming.

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**Saturday - November 25th: Brunswick County Hot Spots**

Full Day Field Trip

After a full day of Thanksgiving eating, why not head to the beach and join us for a great day of birding at the Ocean Isles, Sunset Beach and Ft. Fisher area?

Under the ‘WING’ of Taylor Piephoff we will explore some wonderful barrier island habitat and then head north for lunch and the ferry ride at Southport to do some more afternoon birding at historic Ft Fisher. Past finds on this excursion include snowy owl, cave swallows, all three scoters, common eider, parasitic jaeger, black chinned hummingbird, and cinnamon teal.

We will meet at the Ocean Isle pier parking lot at 8 AM. Contact Taylor at piephofft@aol.com.

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*For detailed directions and maps go to meckbirds.org*
Every fall, on Mexico’s eastern coast just 20 miles north of Veracruz, one of the more spectacular natural wonders of the world takes place. From August through November, trained hawk watchers annually record about 5 million birds of prey heading south for the winter.

I was in Veracruz for the North American Ornithological Congress this fall. I had heard, of course, of this migration spot—my decision to attend the congress was made with it in mind. So, needless to say, along with quite a few of my colleagues I took a day off from the meeting to see it in person. The hawk watch is an hour drive from the rather unlovely port city of Veracruz. Half of the trip is just getting out of the city, but it’s a straight shot and once on the highway, an easy drive through gently rolling, mostly undeveloped terrain. Keith Bildstein, Director of the Hawk Mountain Sanctuary in eastern Pennsylvania and a world-renowned authority on hawk migration, was our guide for the trip. He assured us, tongue firmly in cheek, that as long as we were seeing burros tied up on the left side of the road, we were heading in the right direction.

As soon as you get off the four-lane highway you are on the main drag of the small town of Cardel. Less than a mile from the highway, in the middle of town, we saw our destination, the six-story Bienvenido (Welcome) Hotel, sitting right on the corner of “Main and Palm” (I didn’t get the real names of the streets, but it’s smack in the middle of town). As we drove up, we could see 20 or 30 birders atop the flat roof with scopes and binoculars trained on the sky to the north.

A surprising aspect of this hawk-watch hotspot is that you’re not at a really geologically outstanding (literally) spot. Most hawk watches are on a peninsula (Cape May) or up on a mountain ridge (Hawk Mountain) that serves to funnel raptors to the observers, but at the Cardel site you’re 15 miles from the mountains in the midst of quite flat terrain.

So what’s the deal? Why do all these birds so obligingly fly over this little town? North of Cardel the eastern Sierra Madres send a spur off towards the Gulf of Mexico. This range ends a couple of miles short of the coast. North of this gap between the mountains and the gulf, relatively flat land extends all the way to northern Canada, so virtually all the Broad-winged Hawks, Swainson’s Hawks, and an awful lot of the Turkey Vultures that nest in North America get funneled through that narrow chute and spread out as they move south. The Cardel site is close enough to the end of the funnel that, when the weather is good for soaring, there’s a flood of raptors passing overhead.

The key to this site lies in the migratory behavior of the species that are so abundant. They use a very energy-efficient technique to migrate. Each morning around 10 AM when the sun is heating up the earth, hot air rises in updrafts. Somehow the birds find these “thermals” and effortlessly ride them up thousands of feet. When a few birds find a thermal, all the birds in eyeshot see them going up and fly over to take advantage of that thermal. Soon there may be thousands of hawks streaming into the bottom of the “kettle” of raptors (they call it a vortex in Mexico, which is a bit more descriptive).

Once the birds at the top of the kettle sense they’re no longer getting much lift (the air is cooling and no longer buoyant), they peel off in an extended squadron.

This is when the River of Raptors is at its most impressive. Hundreds or thousands of birds—20 or 30 across and many deep—pass overhead. Their wings are set and tucked in, as they’re on a long, controlled glide to the south. If they’re on a really long glide, they will start to stratify—the heavier Turkey Vultures “sink” to the bottom of the stream, the lighter Broadwings “float” to the top, with Swainson’s in the middle. The thermal-up-and-glide technique is so efficient that I had to think hard to remember if I even saw a hawk flap its wings the whole day we were watching. That’s a bit of an exaggeration, but not much of one.

This system doesn’t work over the water, so all these birds are stuck with migrating over land. Thermals won’t take them over mountains, so when they hit the Sierra Madres, they head south, sometimes riding updrafts where easterly winds hit the mountains rather than thermals, and finally get funneled through the gap north of Cardel.

Peregrines—even the females—are too macho to rely on this lazy system, and the Accipiters (Cooper’s and Sharp-shinned Hawks) don’t have enough lift from their
short wings to use it, so the vast majority of birds flying over Cardel are broad-winged, soaring hawks and vultures—Broadwings, Swainson’s, and Turkey Vultures.

On the roof of the Bienvenido Hotel, the Mexican conservation group Pro Natura has set up a very sophisticated and comfortable operation. On a small, elevated section of the rooftop a team of 3 spotters tally the birds going by. One is recording hourly totals, while the other two are counting birds. You can’t count the birds in the vortex, but they’re easy to keep track of (by 100s!) as they stream out of the top of the kettles. Each spotter has 3 or 4 clicker-counters in his hands. (They do have only two hands each, but they can work two clickers in one hand.) When the migration is strong, the clickers are almost buzzing. If you’re not looking at an oncoming stream of birds and hear lots of clicking, you check which way the counters are looking and pick up the birds.

The hotel doesn’t charge for the privilege, but, according to Keith, they’ve benefited substantially. The restaurant on the first floor has been upgraded from seriously greasy taco to pretty upscale—by local standards.

Below the counting team is a larger section of the roof, complete with an awning providing much needed shade and at least one interpreter calling out identifications as the birds stream by. (Even seasoned birders can be confused by very common birds when they’re in their wings-in, gliding posture.) There’s also a gift shop that supports Pro Natura and cold beer for sale—an essential for good hawk watching.

We climbed the six flights of stairs around 10:30 and settled down amidst the 40 who had preceded us. There’s plenty of room on the roof for a party this big. At the time, no big flights had been seen—just a few birds moving around. As we started looking for birds, a couple of Mississippi Kites made an appearance. I was about to call them Peregrines (out loud) when I was saved by someone more familiar with the species. After explaining that kites have a very squared off tail, unlike Peregrines, Keith said that calling a Mississippi Kite a Peregrine was justification for being thrown off the roof. Some of the local vultures, he explained, depend on the carcasses of birders who had made just such a mistake. That was a close call.

Within a half hour the birds began moving in serious numbers. Someone would spot a kettle forming and we would watch in awe as more and more birds poured into it. The kettles were 2 or 3 binocular field-of-views high. “Oh, my God” was the most commonly heard phrase as the kettles built up. I think you could develop an index of migration strength by recording the number of “Omigods” per hour and dispense with the hard work of all that counting.

When the kettles topped out, a bird or two would take the lead, tucking their wings slightly and drifting south. In the really big kettles, you could watch birds pouring out of the top while birds were still streaming in at the base of the kettle (or swarm as my Canadian friend and appropriately named ornithologist David Bird called it). As one large kettle emptied its birds overhead, Keith said, “There goes the population of Connecticut Broadwings.” A bit later the Massachusetts delegations glided by.

I was pleased to see the lead bird out of one particularly impressive vortex be an Osprey. It led the group right over our heads. Some of the kettles are very distant and
ears. Our rewards for exploring the other site included one huge kettle of Broadwings and a magnificent flock of at least a thousand White Pelicans riding a thermal. The birds were highlighted against a deep blue sky, and as the flock whirled the sun shone off the birds’ brilliant white feathers. Pelicans fly in much more coordinated kettles than raptors—they really take advantage of the vortices created by the wings of their neighbors—so the flock spun in concentric rings, and bright flashes of white rippled up and down the flock as they turned their backs to us. The chaos of a raptor kettle was replaced by pure grace in motion.

We left around 5 PM—happy campers, with our raptor cups fully runnethed over.

The next day was cloudy, windy, and rainy. In other words—two, to be exact: no thermals. Our colleagues who went up that day saw less than 100 birds. Timing is indeed everything.

I can’t leave this story without adding a tiny footnote—about 1/7th of an ounce tiny (or 1/500th of a Turkey Vulture), to be precise. Up on the Chichi platform, during a slow period, someone mentioned that a Mexican Sheartail Hummingbird, a species only found in a very small area in Mexico, had been seen along the soccer field behind the hawk watch. I decided to add the bird to my more or less non-existent life list and walked over to the dead tree purported to be a favorite hang out of the tiny bird. Sure enough, after 15 minutes or so, it appeared and I got a decent look at it.

Back on the tower, I looked up the bird in the new Mexican field guide and saw that the range of the bird is a narrow strip along the eastern edge of the Yucatan, some 600 miles from where we were, with the exception of a single dot on the map, exactly where we were. I decided that the point on the map must have been contributed by some birder, bored with waiting for hawks on a day with no thermals, who just happened to see the hummer near the tower and reported it in. The dot is probably based on something much more scientific, but that’s my story, and I’m sticking to it.

River of Raptors

Washington, DC, October 2, 2006 – Late last week, Congress approved legislation backed by the National Audubon Society designed to protect America’s native migratory birds when they travel south to Latin America and the Caribbean during their migrations.

Known as the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Improvement Act, its chief backer, Wisconsin U.S. Rep. Ron Kind (D) introduced it last year. By updating six year old bird legislation, it earned the immediate support of the National Audubon Society, and subsequently passed through Congress without major opposition. Its two main achievements are that it increases conservation program funding from $5 million to $6.5 million; and it allows Canada to apply for conservation grants.

“Neotropical migratory birds are important to America’s more than 40 million bird watchers, vital to the United States’ economy, and critical to the western hemisphere’s environment,” said Mike Daulton, Director of Conservation Policy for Audubon. “We applaud Representative Kind for guiding this important legislation through Congress with bipartisan support.”

Rep. Wayne Gilchrest (R-MD), and Senators Lincoln Chafee (R-RI) and Jim Jeffords (I-VT) have also bee strong advocates of the bill. The bill is also supported by several other prominent conservation groups.

Neotropical migratory birds breed in North America and travel south to Latin America and the Caribbean during their migrations. Many of these birds can be seen in Wisconsin. In the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge alone there are more than 200 bird species that spend at least part of each year in the neotropics. When these birds travel to Latin America, they face a range of serious threats, from the clear-cutting of forests to harmful pesticides in agricultural fields.

Congress Passes Migratory Bird Bill
Citizen Science: eBird

eBird (www.ebird.org), a project developed by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the National Audubon Society, provides a simple way for you to keep track of the birds you see anywhere in North America. You can retrieve information on your bird observations, from your backyard to your neighborhood to your favorite bird-watching locations, at any time for your personal use. You can also access the entire historical database to find out what other eBirders are reporting from across North America. In addition, the cumulative eBird database is used by birdwatchers, scientists, and conservationists who want to know more about the distribution and movement patterns of birds across the continent.

The eBird database that you are helping to create can be used by you, to track your personal observations and maintain lists of all of the birds you’ve ever seen, those recorded at specific locations, or recorded over specific periods of time; or to create lists of birds recorded from various locations and dates based on the records of other eBirders.

- other birders and amateur naturalists, allowing them to learn about the birds in your region.
- scientists, to uncover patterns in bird movements and ranges across North America, including migratory pathways, wintering and breeding ranges, arrival and departure dates, range expansions and contractions, and a host of other important environmental relationships.
- conservationists, to identify important areas for birds based on current range distributions, and to track population trends that can be used to create management plans for endangered, threatened, and at-risk species.
- educators, who may use the cumulative database to teach students about birds and the scientific process, including collecting, analyzing, and interpreting results.
- anyone, to discover where species can be found throughout the year; which birds are regularly found at specific locations across North America; when certain species arrive or depart from their breeding and wintering grounds; and many other possibilities.

Animated Migration Maps

When you submit a checklist into eBird, your observations become available to researchers examining a variety of topics. The recent rise in the occurrence of Avian Influenza has focused attention on the importance of bird migration. Since eBird collects data throughout the year, it has quickly become one of the best sources of migration data. Researchers at Cornell University’s Department of Computer Science and Theory Center recently used eBird data from the Avian Knowledge Network to explore the patterns of bird migration in the northern parts of the Western Hemisphere. They developed an animated mapping application to provide a visualization of the patterns of migration. Some of these animated maps are now available to eBird users.

Mecklenburg Audubon Society

Join now and your membership will be effective until June 2007.

Because National Audubon has reduced the chapter share of the national membership, Mecklenburg Audubon now must offer a Local Membership to cover the cost of the newsletter, web site & cost of meetings.

Name

Phone

Address [Street, City, ST, and Zip]

- Individual Membership [$10]
- Family Membership [$15]
- Please, save trees and send me[us] the newsletter electronically.
- Please, add me to Meckbirds, the local electronic discussion list about birds and the environment.
- I[we] would be willing to lead a field trip.
- I[we] would be interested in participating in a work day at one of the local preserves.
- I[we] would be willing to do a program.

Return to: Lucy Quintilliano, Treasurer, Mecklenburg Audubon Society, P. O. Box 221093, Charlotte, NC 28222
Activities Calendar

11/2  Hawk Identification [Monthly Meeting]
11/4  Six-mile Creek Greenway [1/2 day Field Trip]
11/9  Landsford Canal [1/2 day Field Trip]
11/12 Pee Dee NWR [Full day Field Trip]
11/14 McDowell Prairie [1/2 day Field Trip]
11/18 Reedy Creek [1/2 day Field Trip]
11/25 Brunswick Co. Hot Spots [Full Day Field Trip]
12/7  'Em R Ducks [Monthly Meeting]
12/9  Wintering Waterfowl [1/2 Day Field Trip]
12/16 Gaston County Christmas Count
12/17 Lake Norman Christmas Count
12/23 Charlotte Christmas Count
12/30 Pee Dee NWR Christmas Count
1/4   Feast and Fotos [Monthly Meeting]

Who's New?
Terri Horton
Sally Miller