Audubon News

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September 2007

Monthly Meeting

State of the Birds

Every year our elected officials give us an update on the state of the county to let us know how things are going. We thought it was time to take a look at the state of the bird life in the Charlotte metropolitan area.

National Audubon Society, through its State of the Birds program, recently published a list of Common Birds in Decline. This comprehensive analysis, compiled mostly from 40 years of citizen science data, includes 20 species that have lost over 50% of their populations in just the past four decades. Species such as Northern Bobwhite and Eastern Meadowlark made this national list and are also among those species vanishing throughout our region.

Join Marek Smith, Natural Resources Coordinator with Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation Department, for an informative presentation on bird conservation in Mecklenburg County. Marek will discuss his agency’s efforts to determine our own species of conservation concern and highlight their ongoing bird inventory and monitoring initiatives. He will also share details on how the County’s natural resource management activities benefit birds in the region and discuss how local birders and wildlife watchers can assist in these efforts.

So don’t miss our first meeting of the 2007-08 season and our first State of the Birds address. We’ll still be gathering (despite the For Sale sign) in the Fellowship Hall of the Sharon Seventh Day Adventist Church, 920 Sharon Amity. Social time with snacks will begin around 7:15 PM and the program will start at 7:30 PM.

Beginner Bird Walks

Are you considering picking up one of the most popular hobbies in the world? Bird watching can be relaxing and challenging all at the same time. Join Audubon members as they lead small groups in the beginning basics of this sport. We will teach you birdcalls, songs and identification techniques. Some birds we expect to see and hear are cardinals, wrens, chickadees, titmice, and mockingbirds. We’ll be using binoculars to look closely at their beak, wing bars, shape and size. These walks will be limited to 10 people. Everyone is welcome. We encourage families and children to “bird” together.

For the last two years, we’ve served various shade grown coffees in our monthly meetings. This was a little more expensive but well worth the cost since it is bird friendly and taste great.

Now, thanks to the folks at the Cotswold Starbucks, we will get our coffee free of charge! They have agreed to supply coffee for all our meetings starting with the September meeting. So next time you’re in the area, stop in and say thanks. And buy a bag of their Organic Shade Grown MEXICO coffee while you’re there. It’s wonderful.
Field Trips

Sunday, Aug 26th: Orangeburg Sod Farms (Full Day)

The Super Sod Farms just outside Orangeburg, SC is an amazing place in August and September. The large expanse of short grass is a magnet for migrating shorebirds. Upland, buff-breasted and pectoral sandpipers are particularly fond of this place and if we are really lucky a golden will be lurking in the grass. And as the morning heats up we usually find ourselves looking at a lot of really neat dragonflies and beautiful butterflies.

There won’t be a lot of walking but it will be HOT!! So you should bring a hat, sunscreen, bug spray and plenty of water and as always snacks are encouraged.

We will meet at 6:30 AM in the Crossroads Mall parking lot located on the right hand side of the main entrance into Carowinds Theme Park off HWY 21. It will take us about 1.5 hours to get down there. If you want to go, contact Judy Walker at birdwalker@mac.com or 704-537-8181.

Saturday, Sept 8th: McDowell Preserve & Prairie (1/2 Day)

The prairie this time of the year is alive with wildflowers, butterflies and of course birds. Blooming endangered Schweinitz’s Sunflowers and abundant Variegated Butterflies will make a walk through the prairie on a Saturday morning enjoyable and rewarding. Birds will probably include a mix of resident and migrants.

There is little shade on the prairies so make sure you bring a hat and plenty of water as the September sun can still be pretty intense. We will be doing a lot of easy walking so comfortable shoes are a must. Snacks are also recommended.

Since parking is very limited, please meet us in the Harris Teeter parking lot at 8AM-at the corner of HWY 160 (Steele Creek Rd.) and HWY 49 (S. Tryon) so we can carpool to the site. If you plan to go, contact Dave Lovett at birdsalot@webtv.net or 704-542-6710.

Sunday, Sept 9th: McAlpine Creek Greenway (Butterflies) (1/2 Day)

Birds are not the only beautiful winged creatures that can be found in the Charlotte area. Butterflies are at their peak in September when a wide variety can be found. The Mecklenburg Park and Recreation Department has created wonderful habitat for butterflies at McAlpine Greenway. We will take a leisurely Sunday afternoon stroll around the greenway to see what we can find. Of course we will look at any feathered fliers that cross our path as well.

We will meet at 2 PM at the Monroe Rd. entrance to the Greenway. If you are interesting in participating, contact Taylor Piephoff at piephofft@aol.com.

Thursday, Sept 13th: Huntingtowne Farms (1/2 Day)

Meander with us along Lower Sugar Creek as we join fellow MAS members Dean and Vivian Sprehe at this lovely urban greenway. We will be looking for permanent creek side inhabitants along with any fall migrants passing thru. Huntingtowne Farms Park runs beside Little Sugar Creek, and is part of the county greenway system. With a great blend of habitats, anything could turn up during Fall migration.

Meet in the parking lot at the end of Huntingtowne Farms Road off of Park road at 8:30 AM. Contact the Spreches at 704-552-1864 or VSPREHE@Carolina.rr.com if you plan on going.

Directions and detailed information about field trips can be found at meckbirds.org
Field Trips

Saturday, Sept 15th: Colonel Francis Beatty Park (1/2 Day)
This park in the southeast corner of the county was recently discovered by folks living in the Matthews area. Its variety of habitats should yield many local residents as well as fall migrants.

We will meet at 8 AM in the main building parking lot. It is the left turn that leads you to the paddleboat rental area. If you plan to go contact Andrea Owens at andreawoens1@yahoo.com or 704-651-2232.

Tuesday, Sept 18th: Latta Park (1/2 Day)
Latta Park in Dilworth, traditionally a spring migrant hotspot, can also be a good location in the autumn for early migrants and resident county birds. After studying up on your ‘confusing fall warblers’, meet at the park (the parking lot is near the shelter & playground) at 8:30 AM and we will try and match the pictures to the birds. If you want to join the walk contact Dave Lovett at birdsalot@webtv.net or 704-542-6710.

Saturday, Sept 22nd: Jackson Park (Full Day)
You may have heard about how fabulous spring migration is in Central Park, NYC. Well Jackson Park in Hendersonville, NC is a close rival, especially in the fall. In past years birds were dripping off the trees. Hopefully, we will hit one of its wonderful waves of warblers and if the birding gods are smiling on us we may run into something as exciting as a Philadelphia Vireo or Mourning Warbler.

We will meet at 8 AM at the McDonalds on Four Seasons Blvd. (Exit 49 off I-26). It’s on the right as you are heading into Hendersonville. Rt. 74 makes this a quick 2-hour drive from Charlotte so you could drive out in the Saturday AM. More information about hotels can be found on the web site (meckbirds.org/trips/sep.htm#jackson). If you plan on going contact Judy Walker at birdwalker@mac.com or 704-537-8181.

Saturday, Sept 22nd: Beginning Birders (1/2 day)
To kick-off our new series of Beginner Bird Walks specially structured for the novice birder, we have selected this park as a great all-around spot for the program. McAlpine Creek Greenway has easy trails, a lake, beaver flooded area, and grassy fields providing a variety of habitats and birding opportunities.

A pair of binoculars will be helpful, as would a field guide if you have one. Participation is limited to the first ten registrants so sign up early. If you are interested in going, contact Lucy Quintilliano at lucyq@carolina.rr.com or 704-364-9028.

Saturday, Sept 29th: Gaston Co., St. Environmental Forest (1/2 Day)
Steve Tracy, one of our Gaston county members has discovered a new and potentially excellent birding site just across the river in Gaston & Lincoln counties. It’s called Mountain Island Educational State Forest and runs along the west side of Mt. Island Lake. Birds already discovered are Great Horned Owl, turkey, Bobwhite and Osprey. Since this is along a waterway fall migrants may be plentiful.

We will meet at the gas station at the corner of Killian Rd and NC Hwy 16 near Lucia (detailed map on the web site.) at 8 AM. There will be a fair amount of walking so sturdy shoes are recommended. Bring snacks & water. A hat and insect repellent are also recommended this time of the year. Contact Steve at stevepath1@aol.com or 704-853-0654 if you plan to go.
Have you ever noticed that first impressions can be deceiving? You might see someone with weird clothes and think they must be weird too. Then when you actually get to know them they are just as normal as you. Well that’s what this new column is about – getting to know some birds you might have some misconceptions about or even biases against. I am convinced that all birds have their place in the greater scheme of things and that we can at least come to respect if not love them for who they are.

The first bird on the list is the Common Grackle. I chose to start with this bird because everyone, including myself, was complaining about them this spring. They appeared on many backyard feeders and stayed much to our disapproval. But I am not going to dwell on the negatives. What I want to do is tell you some very interesting, cool facts about these handsome birds.

The grackles that took up residence in my yard this season showed up in late winter as they usually do to chow down on some suet. But they also discovered the peanut feeder. Like many of the other ground feeding birds they started off picking up pieces that fell on the ground. However, it didn’t take these intelligent birds long to figure out how to perch on the feeder and get the peanuts themselves. The grackle bill, however, isn’t made like a woodpecker’s or chickadee’s who usually hammer the kernels into smaller pieces. And the peanuts were a little too big and hard for the grackles to eat whole. I was surprised and fascinated to watch as one of the birds took a peanut from the feeder and went over to the birdbath and dumped it in the water. It then proceeded to take a few drinks, preen a few feathers and generally harass one of its relatives. After a few minutes it went back to the birdbath and took the peanut out of the water and slide it down its throat whole! This behavior is called – what else – dunking and is done for a variety of reasons one of which is to soften the food item for digestion. I watched this behavior on numerous occasions throughout the spring and summer.

Grackles are pretty opportunistic when it comes to food, but generally they eat more insects and other invertebrates during the breeding season and then switch to seeds and fruits during the rest of the year. Most of us are aware that jays and oak trees are intricately connected, but are not aware that the grackle’s bill is also uniquely designed to eat acorns. Its bill has a hard, internal keel projecting downward from the horny palate, which is very sharp. This keel extends below the cutting edge of the bill and is used as sawing adaptation to open acorns, which are often completely scored around shorter diameter and then cracked.

Farmers and bird feeders lament that the grackle eats too much and is a pest. But did you know that the grackle is on of the few animals that will eat Japanese beetles? Which pest would you prefer to have around? They also consume a large number of grasshoppers and crickets.

Both the common and scientific name of this bird is a puzzle. The genus name Quiscalus gives scholars a case of the frets. Does it come from the Latin quis meaning ‘what’, and/or quails meaning of what kind? But why? Or does it come from quisquis for quail? Or does it come from the Spanish quisquilla meaning to quibble – a reference to the noisy, chattering birds? Or from the Latin quisquiliae meaning refuse, dregs referring to the diet of the garbage bird? Linnaeus, who designated the genus, was not known to invent names, but in this instance he has left everyone guessing.

In the fall and winter grackles congregate in large mixed flocks with red-wings, meadowlarks, and starlings. One of my favorite experiences is being at Pee Dee NWR and running into one of these flocks moving through the fields. One time we watched them move through the low grounds for over 15 minutes. There had to be close to 100,000 birds. I bring up these big flocks because in the fall and winter we actually have three different races wintering in NC – one from the central part of the country, one from further north and of course our own resident birds. So for those of you who want to take your identification skills up a notch – try to id the different races. Birds from the central part of the country show a uniformly brassy bronze back and belly and purplish tail. The head color is somewhat variable but usually blue-green. This race was formerly considered

Continued on page 7
The North Carolina Birding Trail Coastal Plain Trail Guide

Even if you’ve never set hiking boot to beginner trail, you’re going to love The North Carolina Birding Trail Coastal Plain Trail Guide for its gorgeous photography. The Coastal Plain Trail Guide is the first book in a series of three regional guides that will eventually cover the entire state, published by the North Carolina Birding Trail, a partnership among six agencies and organizations in North Carolina. Their mission is “…to conserve and enhance North Carolina’s bird habitat by promoting sustainable bird watching activities, economic opportunities and conservation education.” This first guide, with beautiful pictures, helpful information and easy-to-read format, will surely help accomplish this mission.

The Coastal Plain Trail Guide covers 102 birding sites in 16 groups, all east of I-95. The sites in each group are all within easy traveling distance of each other, but can be visited individually or in any order of your choosing. Each site contains a map, directions, site description, access and parking, the species of interest, and special features or concerns. All the information you need to know to get the most out of your visit is readily available in this guide.

And the best part is that a limited number of copies of The North Carolina Birding Trail Coastal Plain Trail Guide will be available for purchase at the September MAS meeting for the modest price of $10 each!

- Jill Shoemaker

NC Birding Trail Fundraiser

Many of you have used birding trail guides published by several states such as Florida and Texas. Now North Carolina is publishing three guides for our state. The Coastal Plain Trail Guide is now available, and is reviewed elsewhere in the newsletter. We will have copies for sale at our September meeting. Unlike some states that issue a simple foldout map, the NC first volume is a 172-page spiral bound book with detailed directions, access information, target species, and habitat and amenities descriptions. Your cost at the meeting is only $10, the retail price on the web, so bring some extra cash or your checkbook to the meeting.

Eventually there will be two more NC trail guides – one for the piedmont and one for the mountains. The piedmont guide is now in the works, and Mecklenburg Audubon has nominated several local hotspots for inclusion in the guide. This project is not inexpensive, so we’re fortunate to have a $50,000 grant for the piedmont guide. However, this is a $ for $ matching grant which means funds are released only to match other contributions. Here’s where you come in. For every $1 Mecklenburg Audubon raises (up to $500), the board has voted to contribute another $1. The Carolina Bird Club has agreed to match our combined contribution (up to $1,000) $ for $. This compounded amount is then matched $ for $ by the grant, so every dollar we raise turns into $8 toward the upfront cost of the piedmont guide!

Although we do not often ask our members for contributions beyond the annual dues, your board is asking for your financial help. This is a project of local importance, and the compounding matches by our club, CBC and the grant provide a unique opportunity to maximize the benefit of your charitable contributions budget.

You can make your donations at our September or October meetings, or send them to the return address on this newsletter. We will provide documentation for your tax records if requested.
I try to recycle by re-using, such as the Chinese delivery plastic soup tubs, the plastic tupperware-like containers some deli meat comes in, and recently learned I shouldn’t microwave them. Is it ok to wash them in a dishwasher repeatedly or will they eventually “go bad” from the pressure and heat?

You’re certainly doing the right thing by reusing as much as you can, but you are wise to have health concerns about plastic. Hot liquid and scrubbing can cause the plastic surface to degrade, with possible health implications. There are several types of plastic, each the subject of environmental and/or health issues.

Plastics are organized into six general categories. A triangle-enclosed number from 1 to 7 can be found on the bottom of many plastic containers. Types 1, 2, 4 and 5 are generally considered to be the safer plastics. Plastic type 3, PVC, contains phthalates, ingredients that make the plastic flexible, but are known to be carcinogenic. Styrene, a suspected endocrine disruptor as well as a possible carcinogen, is a component of type 6, polystyrene. Plastic type 7 contains the hormone disrupter bisphenol A.

Hot foods or liquids can cause plastics to leach or give off bits of component materials. Scrubbing vigorously or scraping the food from a plastic container with a utensil can cause particles to leach. Since plastic is a plastic material, small scrapes and indentations occur easily and can become a breeding ground for bacteria from embedded food or liquid. Much as I hate to see more plastic added to the waste stream, many experts recommend that you err on the side of caution and not reuse these items. Recycle what is allowable under your local regulations. Glass or ceramic containers are a better alternative for food storage, lasting indefinitely and posing no health threats. Glass is readily recyclable, which is not the case with many types of plastic.

For the Techobirder – Blogs

If you haven’t discovered birding blogs you are missing out on some pretty cool, vicarious birding. The blogs listed below include writings about birds, birding, ornithology, nature, conservation and much more. These blogs are written by birders and nature enthusiasts from around the world, and as such provide personal windows on other parts of the world. Because they are personal they do include opinions and personal viewpoints but can be very informative and thought provoking. And the photography is usually stunning!

I will warn you, this reading can become addictive. Beware and enjoy.

10,000 Birds - http://10000birds.com
All About Birds (Cornell Lab of Ornithology) http://www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAboutBirds/blog
Big Country Audubon (Texas) http://www.bigcountryaudubon.org/category/blog/
Bill of the Birds (Bird Watcher’s Digest) http://www.birdwatchersdigest.com/blog/blogger.html
Stokes Birding Blog http://www.stokesbirdblog.blogspot.com/
WildBird on the Fly (Editor of WildBirds) http://wildbirdonthefly.blogspot.com/
Additional links can be found at http://del.icio.us/Meckbirds/Blogs
Join now and your membership will be effective until June 2008.

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]

E-mail

- Please, save trees and send me[us] the newsletter electronically.
- Please, add me to Meckbirds, the local listserv 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.
- [ ] I[we] would be willing to do a program.

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Tips for Novice Birders

Birds are likely to be alarmed by noise or sudden movement so move slowly and quietly. Watch the vegetation for movement that may give away a bird’s location. Watch for signs of alarm in birds: a freeze in posture, a cocked head, or half raised wings. These tell you to stop moving until the bird calms down or to back away if necessary.

Grackles (Continued)
a separate species. The resident NC birds typically have a dark green back and the tail blue-green; the head is usually purple and the belly purple-blue. The birds from up north generally have a purple back and belly and the tail usually blue-green. Good luck.

So the next time you see a common grackle consider some of their positive attributes and unique characteristics. They should give you a different perspective on this often maligned bird.

“Ecological ignorance breeds indifference: what we know, we may choose to care for. What we fail to recognize, we certainly won’t.”
- Robert Michael Pyle

Swat a Litterbug

How many times have you seen someone throw trash out the car window? Don’t you just want to smack them up the side of the head! Well now you can really do something about it and not get arrested yourself. Lucy Quintilliano found a web site call Swat-A-Litterbug. This program provides every citizen an opportunity to be an active participant in ensuring the roadways of North Carolina are kept clean, beautiful, and safe. Let the NC Dept. of Transportation know when a person is littering by contacting their Office of Beautification Programs through the Swat-A-Litterbug program at http://www.ncdot.org/doh/operations/dp_chief_eng/roadside/Beautification/Litterbug/
Is it Time for You to Renew?

Take a look at your mailing label. Does it say 6/07? If it does it’s time for you to renew. Renewing now will guarantee that you will receive newsletters in the fall. So don’t miss an issue.

Activities Calendar

8/26 Orangeburg Sod Farms, SC (Full Day Field Trip)
9/6 State of the Birds (Monthly Meeting)
9/8 McDowell Prairie (1/2 day Field Trip)
9/9 Butterfly Walk, McAlpine Creek Greenway (1/2 day Field Trip)
9/13 Huntingtowne Farms Greenway (1/2 day Field Trip)
9/15 Colonel Beatty Park (1/2 day Field Trip)
9/18 Latta Park, Dilworth (1/2 day Field Trip)
9/22 Jackson Park, Henderson, NC (Full Day Field Trip)
9/22 Beginning Birder Walk, McAlpine Greenway (1/2 Day Field Trip)
9/28-30 Carolina Bird Club Fall Meeting, Santee, SC
9/29 Mt. Island Educational State Forest (Field Trip)
10/4 Marvelous Mushrooms (Monthly Meeting)
10/6 Ribbon Walk Preserve (Field Trip)
10/13 Moore Property, (Field Trip)
10/14 Big Sit, Cowan’s Ford Refuge
10/20 Huntington Beach, SC (Field Trip)
10/27 Evergreen Preserve (Field Trip)