Called "America’s Serengeti" for its tremendous biological productivity and diversity, the coastal plain of Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is one of the most intact and untouched ecosystems in America. It is also a political hot potato. The refuge was established in 1960 under President Dwight Eisenhower, but while much of Alaska remains open to oil and gas drilling, oil and gas interests continue to lobby hard to drill in the refuge as well.

Taldi Walter, National Audubon’s Alaska Field Coordinator, will be joining us this month to better acquaint us with the refuge and the threats to its continued health by introducing us to some of the important natural areas and brilliant birds found in wild Alaska. She will also share how National Audubon is seeking a balance between resource extraction & protecting internationally critical habitat.

Don’t miss this unique presentation on Thursday, April 3rd at 7:30 PM in the fellowship hall of the Sharon Seventh Day Adventist Church.

The Haw River State Park was born in 2003 and is still in its infancy, but already includes one of the state park system’s crown jewels, The Summit Environmental Education Center. Purchased by the state in 2005, this facility is where the T. Gilbert Pearson Audubon Society (Guilford County) will host the 2008 ANC Annual Meeting. Formerly owned by the Episcopal Church, the Summit provides one-stop conferencing, with newly renovated meeting facilities, motel-style lodging, and dining rooms.

The Summit also is replete with great birding opportunities on the wonderful trails around its 6-acre lake, and along the boardwalk leading through the wetlands to the Haw River. From this incredibly beautiful 300-acre place just 10 miles north of Greensboro a variety of other great birding areas and nature walks are easily accessible. For history buffs, a short drive into Greensboro will provide access to Pearson’s bird and egg collections as well as a visit to his gravesite in Green Hill Cemetery.

The Pearson Chapter invites all Auduboners in NC to join us for our annual gathering at a truly exceptional place, the Summit at Haw River State Park. The 2008 Annual Meeting, we are sure, will be great fun for all. Mark your calendars for MAY 30–JUNE 1, 2008, and plan to stay "out in the woods" for the whole weekend. We’ll “wine and dine” you, and dish up great birding right outside your door.


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Field Trips

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!!

Thursday, April 10: Kalmia Gardens
Full Day - Moderate to hard

Located on the grounds of Coker College in Hartsville, SC, Kalmia Gardens should provide some great spring birding. Stairs descend 60’ down to the floodplain of the Black Creek and a black water cypress swamp. An extensive system of boardwalks and trails allows us to explore this unique habitat. Beech, oak, loblolly pine, hickory and tulip poplars dominate the forest, with mountain laurels common on the north facing slopes. So we should expect hooded and prothonotary warblers to be plentiful along with a variety of other neo-tropic migrants.

Rest rooms are available along with picnic facilities. Pack a lunch along with snacks, water, and insect repellent.

We will meet at EARTH FARE on Johnston Road at 7:30 AM. Contact Dave Lovett at 704-507-7677 or birdsalot@webtv.net if you plan on going.

Saturday, April 12: Rural Hill Preserve
1/2 Day - Moderate

Join John Bonestell for a Saturday morning of birding at Rural Hill Preserve, home of the Scottish Games, in Northern Mecklenburg County. This farmland setting offers great potential for both grassland/field species and woodland residents.

Meet John at 8 AM in the preserve parking lot off Neck Road. Neck Road is off Beatties Ford Rd. north of Latta Plantation Nature Preserve. Let John know you are coming at jmcblake@aol.com or 704-896-2300.

Thursday, April 17: Landsford Canal State Park
1/2 Day - Easy

Join longtime MAS Member Harriett Whitsett for a day of spring birding along the Catawba River.

Lansford Canal, a South Carolina state park not too far south of the border, is another great place to be during spring migration. Migrants should be moving up river to the high country. We should encounter a variety of warblers so make sure you exercise your neck the night before. After a lovely walk along the river we will have lunch in the picnic area and then head for home in the early afternoon.

Meet in the Landsford Canal State Park parking lot at 9:15 AM. There is a $2 entrance fee to the park. If you plan on going notify Harriett at whitsettthm@Bellsouth.net or call 704-333-0479.

Saturday, April 19: Crowder’s Mt. State Park
1/2 day - Moderate to hard

Spring is a lovely time of year at Crowder’s Mt. State Park. Just ask Ron Clark who lives adjacent to it! A NC Natural Heritage Area, the park with its Continued on page 3
800’ high slope includes a 9 acre lake, many trails and good access to the migrant and resident birds it hosts.

Meet Ron, a fellow MAS member, at the Park office at 8 AM. To sign-up for the trip contact Ron at 704-866-0811 or waxwing@bellsouth.net

**Tuesday, April 22: Lower McAlpine Creek Greenway**
1/2 Day - Easy

Join fellow MAS member John Buckman for a morning of birding along Lower McAlpine Creek Greenway. This is easy birding on a paved path that can prove quite fruitful.

Meet at the Shandon Circle entrance to the greenway at 8:30 AM. For more info contact John at 704-541-7433 or linbuckman@aol.com

**Thursday, April 24: Huntingtowne Farms Greenway**
1/2 Day - Easy

Vivian and Dean Sprehe are again inviting folks to join them on their morning walk along Little Sugar Creek. This paved Greenway stretch always yields some great spring birds.

For more info contact the Sprehes at 704-577-2110 or vsprehe@carolina.rr.com. Meet in the parking lot at the end of Huntingtowne Farms Rd. at 8:30 AM.

**Saturday, April 26: Rankin-Redlair Farm, Gaston County**
1/2 Day - Moderate

Rankin-Redlair is one of the crown jewels in the Catawba Lands Conservancy conservation easements. Located on the bank of the South Fork of the Catawba River, the old family farm of the Rankin family is a mix of pasture and rolling woods. We should see a good mix of migrants in this diverse habitat. The terrain is hilly, but we’ll be on some of the many well-maintained trails.

We’ll meet at the entrance to Belmont Abbey College at 7:30 and drive the remaining few miles over to the property in caravan. Contact Rob Bierregaard at 704-333-2405 or rbierreg@uncc.edu if you plan on joining the group.

**Sunday, April 27: Latta Park in Dilworth**
1/2 Day - Easy

**THE** place to be during spring migration. Neotropic migrants such as Baltimore Oriole, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Gray-cheeked Thrush and a wide variety of warblers are attracted to the variety of mature flowering tree and small sheltered stream. It’s possible, if the birding gods are on your side to see as many as 20 warbler species in this diminutive park.

Join Ron Clark for a morning guaranteed to give you ‘warbler neck’ as we try and pick out those little feathered guys, darting about the treetops. Meet in the parking lot at 8:30 AM. For further info contact Ron at 704-866-0811 or waxwing@bellsouth.net.
Birds We Love to Hate

The Black Vagabond

I can tell spring has arrived because of new arrivals at my feeders. One bird in particular elicits both dread and wonder. It’s the cowbird. You know why I dread seeing it in the neighborhood. Its appearance means some unsuspecting song sparrow will probably be raising someone else’s young this spring, although last year I didn’t see any young cowbirds at the feeders. I usually see one or two. But I also have to wonder about and, yes, even to some extent admire, this plain looking bird with such an unusual lifestyle.

Locals originally called these birds ‘buffalo birds’ because they followed herds of bison around eating the seeds in the bison’s droppings and also the insects stirred up by their movement. Even today cowbirds are primarily associated with cows or other large grazing animals. But their scientific name also does a good job of describing the bird. The genus name *molothrus* means vagabond, tramp, or hobo, referring to the fact that the bird is always on the move and depending on the ‘kindness’ of others. The Latin word *ater* means black and refers to the male’s black plumage.

The fact that the bird is constantly on the move is often given as the reason for the bird not building a nest and settling down to raise a family and instead becoming a parasitic egg layer. But some scientists think there were other unknown contributing factors and that we may never really know how the birds developed this life style. There are two factors that contribute to this thinking. First the cowbird is somewhat of an anomaly within the family it belongs to, *Icterids*, which includes blackbirds, grackles, bobolinks, orioles and meadowlarks. Birds in this family are considered to be quite adept at constructing nests; case in point is the elaborate nests that orioles construct. Even within their genus there appears to be a continuum of brood parasitism with the Brown-headed Cowbird at one extreme. Secondly, the Cedar Waxwing is also a very transient bird, constantly on the move looking for new food sources, but they did not develop a parasitic lifestyle.

What is amazing about cowbirds is the female’s egg laying ability. Some have likened her to a passerine hen. She doesn’t seem to have a structured clutch size. She usually lays one egg a day for 10-12 days, then takes off a few and then starts over again. She can lay anywhere from 36-40 eggs per season. Laying that many eggs in a season puts an incredible strain on the bird. Interestingly though, recent studies indicate only about 3% of all the eggs laid result in adults. Considering how maligned these birds are, that’s a much smaller number than expected.

Speaking of being maligned, let’s think about the problem rationally. The cowbirds life style worked well for thousands of years. Both cowbirds and the species they used as hosts flourished in a natural equilibrium. Even today some studies indicate that endangered species such as the least Bell’s Vireo and Southwestern Willow Flycatcher can have brood parasitism rates of 50% or greater without severely affecting their seasonal reproductive rates. An Oklahoma study (http://www.suttoncenter.org/bhco.htm) found that “species that showed the highest rates of brood parasitism have nest success rates for parasitized nests equal to or higher than unparasitized nests.”

There seems to be more of a problem in areas where cowbirds have taken advantage of human activity and expanded their range. Deforestation and habitat destruction has brought these birds into contact with
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Be the first to hang a Brad Kuntz unique, original photo in your house while you support the Audubon Adventures program in the schools! It’s easy, just enter Mecklenburg Audubon’s raffle.

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You can view the framed picture on display at the Mecklenburg Audubon meetings in April and May before the winning ticket is drawn at our annual picnic in June.

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At the same time, you will support the Mecklenburg Audubon Society’s gift of Audubon Adventures educational programs to the schools. All proceeds from this raffle will go to the program.

We thank Brad Kuntz for his generous donation of the photograph, taken at Evergreen Nature Preserve. In addition, Gene Tomko at Wolfe Camera donated the fine enlargement.

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Mark Your Calendars

The May Meeting will be on Thursday, May 8th!!
Tips for Novice Birders

Feather Forecasting: Learn about Distribution and Weather

By Paul Lehman (Adapted from Good Birder’s Don’t Wear White, Houghton Mifflin, 2007.

Timing is everything, in birding as well as in life. Some characteristics of avian behavior lend themselves to getting the timing just right, such as the predictable patterns of migration and distribution.

Although it is critical to learn about the field identification of birds, it is also extremely important to learn as much as you can about bird distribution, seasonal status, and habitat requirements. Understanding what is expected in a given region and at a given time of year makes a birder more aware of what would be unusual. If you believe you have found a species that is well out of range or out of season, you can make extra efforts to study it thoroughly, noting as many field marks as possible and making sure to rule out similar species.

I have seen people misidentify birds not because they didn’t know the birds’ field marks but because of their unfamiliarity with status and distribution. A birder may know how a Swainson’s Thrush is supposed to differ from a Hermit Thrush, and both species may be regular breeders or migrants where he lives or is visiting. On the one hand, if this same person is unaware that Swainson’s Thrush is almost unknown in the United States and Canada after the first few days of November, he might be tempted to report one erroneously, for example, on a Christmas Bird Count. On the other hand, if he appreciates the nuances of avian status and distribution and truly believes he has found a Swainson’s in winter, then he will know at the time that the bird needs to be thoroughly documented and photographed if possible, and news of its presence quickly spread among the birding community so that others may corroborate the sighting. Yes, some birds do wander way out of their normal range and occur at unusual seasons – finding such birds is a major allure for many a birder. We need to be prepared, beforehand, for what would be unusual and treat these occurrences as such.

So how does one learn about avian status and distribution? Look at the range maps in your field guides. Buy books dealing with bird distribution: most states and provinces, and many smaller regions, have volumes dealing with just this topic. Also, read state or provincial magazines and journals that include seasonal summaries, perhaps subscribe to North American Birds magazine, and read as many of the regional seasonal reports as you can.

Last, travel! Go birding in many regions of North America and not only in those where you can find a number of life birds. Learn the field marks of species that are potential rarities in your home region by studying good numbers of that species where it is found more commonly. There really is no better way to gain an appreciation of the status, distribution, and habitat requirements of our continent’s birds.

There is a wild card, however, when it comes to birds: weather. Understanding and closely following the weather is a crucial component of successful birding. Heading out into the field without first checking the weather forecast one or two days ahead of time, particularly during the spring and fall migration seasons, may well hinder your success.

It is important to keep up-to-date on meteorological happenings for two reasons. First, there is the question of personal comfort and safety. For land birding, you probably will wish to avoid 50 mph winds; such conditions may be just the ticket, though, if you are sea-watching or chasing

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Alaska in Your Backyard

Each year, millions of birds journey from their breeding and staging habitats on the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to our backyards, parks and wildlife refuges. Their migrations take them to each of the 50 states, and they cross great oceans and follow distant coastlines to reach the lands and waters of six continents.

Unfortunately, Congress has renewed attempts to open the Refuge to oil drilling, threatening the birds and wildlife that rely on this rich habitat. Allowing oil drilling in the Refuge would destroy the remaining 5% of untouched and undeveloped coastline of Alaska’s North Slope. The same birds that migrate through habitats near our homes could in some way be harmed if the drilling special interests have their way.

That’s another reason why protecting the Arctic Refuge from oil drilling is important — not just to save one of America’s last pristine wildlife areas, but also to save migratory birds right in your area. Here are just a few that may call North Carolina home for some part of the year: Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Fox Sparrow, Snow Goose, Greater Scaup, Peregrine Falcon, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Least Sandpiper, Red-throated Loon, Black-bellied Plover, Tundra Swan, American Pipit, Ruddy Turnstone, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Horned Grebe, Wilson’s Snipe, Dunlin, Semipalmated Plover, White-crowned Sparrow, Green-winged Teal, and Rusty Blackbird.

Birding Tips (Cont.)

down the remnants of a tropical storm or hurricane, hoping to find some storm-blown avian waifs. Second is the more germane issue of the profound effects of the weather on the normal movements of birds. A successful day in the field during migration will probably depend on when and where you decide to go birding and what types of birds you are looking for – of which are affected by the weather that day and the previous day.

It is important to remember that the weather usually does not ‘cause’ avian migration. Migration is caused by factors such as changes in day length and variation in food supply. However, weather does affect the short-term timing, direction, and magnitude of the movement of birds. The calendar might say that it is the peak of the hawk or warbler migration, but if the weather is not conducive to such movements, there won’t be very many birds to see.

Black Vagabonds (Cont.)

other species that have not evolved with the cowbird in the open prairies. The cowbirds are simply relying on their innate breeding strategies and choosing nests of the new species they encounter. They don’t always make wise choices though. Cowbird eggs have been found in the nests of Blue-winged Teal, hawks and woodpeckers. All of which were not suitable host parents. Just imagine a hawk trying to feed a cowbird chick or a duck expecting its strange offspring to jump into the water and swim!! All in all cowbird eggs have been found in the nests of 230 species with only 144 of those species actually being able to raise a young cowbird.

What really makes me wonder about these birds is how do they know they are cowbirds? There has been a lot written about their lifestyle, but I found little to nothing about how this lifestyle is passed on. Why don’t the young imprint on their host parents and think they are a sparrow or robin? How do the females learn how to choose a nest when they have never made one themselves? Is it all genetically hard-wired? Then how did they ‘evolve’ into the birds they are today? That’s what makes these birds really fascinating!
Activities Calendar

3/29-20 Four Hole Swamp/Magnolia Gardens (Weekend Field Trip)
4/3 Arctic Wildlife Refuge (Monthly Meeting)
4/10 Kalmia Gardens (Full Day Field Trip)
4/12 Rural Hill (1/2 Day Field Trip)
4/17 Landsford Canal State Park, SC (1/2 Day Field Trip)
4/18-20 Santee Nature Festival and/or Congaree Swamp Nature Fest
4/19 Crowder’s Mt. State Park (1/2 day Field Trip)
4/19 Beginning Bird Walk (McAlpine Creek Greenway) (1/2 Day Field Trip)
4/22 Lower McAlpine Creek Greenway (1/2 day Field Trip)
4/24 Huntingtowne Farms Greenway (1/2 day Field Trip)
4/26 Rankin-Redlair Farm (1/2 day Field Trip)
4/27 Latta Park (Dilworth) 1/2 day Field Trip

It’s Time to Renew

To guarantee that you don’t miss the fall issue of the Audubon News please remember to renew. Subscriptions go from July 1st through June 30th.

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Mecklenburg Audubon Society
Join now and your membership will be effective until June 2009.

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.

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