Monthly Meeting

Food, Fun and Photos

As the New Year begins we all tend to take a few minutes to review the past year. For nature lovers that means reliving the year’s outdoor adventures. Why not take this opportunity to not only reminisce about them but also share your experiences with others?

That’s what happens at the January meeting. It’s like the old kindergarten ‘Show & Tell’, except for adults it’s more a ‘Brag & Tell’. But that doesn’t matter, bring your pictures in print or on CD to share with everyone. If you’re a budding digital video producer, bring those as well. Try to limit your sharing to about 5–6 minutes. Some of us don’t get to travel as much as others so this provides us an opportunity to travel vicariously through your experiences.

This meeting is also our annual POT LUCK dinner, which means we meet at 6:30 PM and you can bring your leftovers from you New Year’s bashes. If you are bringing something that you have made bring a copy of the recipe. We’re going to start collecting them to create a cookbook! Please bring a place setting for each person coming. The club will provide coffee & other beverages.

So don’t forget to bring your pictures, videos, food and friends to the Sharon Seventh Day Adventist Church (920 Sharon Amity) on Thursday, January 3rd. Dinner will start at 6:30 and the meeting will start around 7:45 PM. See you there with all your stuff!

Make Your 2008 Birding Count

Back in September Marek Smith from the Mecklenburg Park & Recreation Department’s Division of Natural Resources (DNR) presented a fantastic program on the state of the birds Mecklenburg County. During that program he mentioned a species database that they have developed using data gathered from various sources including reports on our listserv MAS-L. At that time Marek and I said we would try to provide access to that database via our website Meckbirds.org. Since then we have tried to do that but we have discovered our technical abilities are not sufficient to provide this service at this time.

So in lieu of direct access to the database, we have created a datasheet that we would like folks to use when birding in Mecklenburg and surrounding counties. The sheet can be found at http://meckbirds.org/conservation/fieldrecordsheet.doc. You don’t have to be on an official outing, what you see in your own backyard is very helpful. Although we tend to concentrate on birds other wildlife (i.e. Ken’s coyote at Evergreen) and significant flora can and should be included since the database is for all natural resources.

Once you complete the sheet you can do one of several things: 1) mail it to the address on the sheet;
Field Trips

Saturday, January 12, 2008: Latta Plantation Preserve
1/2 Day Leader: Kevin Metcalf

Kicking off our 2008 bird walk year, will be a winter walk with Kevin Metcalf from Park & Recreation Dept. at Latta Plantation Nature Preserve. We will be looking for wintering bird species in the various habitats at the Preserve. Feeder at the center also provide a good birding oasis.

Meet in the Nature Center parking lot for the 9 AM - 11 AM walk. Please let Kevin know if you will be joining the group at 704-875-1391 or Kevin.Metcalf@Mecklenburgcountync.gov.

Thursday, January 17, 2008: McMullen Creek Greenway
1/2 Day Leader: Dave Lovett

Join us this quiet weekday morning as we bird our way along Mc Mullen Creek. We will be looking for winter wren and rusty blackbirds among other species inhabiting the creek floodplain.

Meet in the parking lot off HWY 51 at 9 AM. Contact Dave at 704-507-7677 or birdsalot@webtv.net if you plan to join the walk.

Saturday, January 19, 2008: Huntington Beach State Park, SC
Full Day Leader: Judy Walker

Our winter excursion to Huntington Beach State Park is an annual favorite offering some different bird species than our Fall trip. Waterbirds - both freshwater and saltwater - have arrived in good numbers including loons, grebes, and ducks. Gannets are numerous offshore along with shorebirds along the quiet beaches.

We will meet at 8 AM in the causeway parking lot. Be sure and dress warmly as the winds off the ocean can be chilling, and bring a lunch for a midday break.

For those interested, Saturday evening we will gather at a local restaurant for dinner. Sunday we will bird for half a day before heading home.

Contact Judy at 704-687-2559 or birdwalker@mac.com if you plan on going.

Local hotels with off season rates include: Litchfield Inn [843-237-4211], Days Inn Surfside [843-238-4444], Brookwood Inn [843-651-2550].

Saturday, January 26, 2008: McAlpine Creek Greenway
1/2 Day Leader: Ron Clark

Mc Alpine Creek Park off Monroe Road offers excellent winter habitat for wintering birds including a lake, beaver pond, athletic fields, grassy areas and creek side floodplains. Join us for a walk in the park.

Meet in the Monroe Road parking lot at 8:30 AM. Contact Ron at 704-866-0811 or waxwing@bellsouth.net if you plan to join the group.

For detailed directions go to meckbirds.org/trips/jan.htm
As a child growing up in northern New Jersey, less than 10 miles as the crow flies from the heart of New York City, I would sit on our back stoop and watch the few birds that frequented our modest backyard. I remember jays and robins in the trees with an occasional cardinal. But the birds that fascinated me the most were the cheery little brown birds that loved to scrap the ground around our driveway and eat the occasional bread crumbs my mother would throw out for them. We just called them sparrows but of course they were House Sparrows. Over the years I have learned a great deal about these little brown jobs — the good, the bad and the ugly things. But somewhere down deep down I still have a soft spot for these misplaced birds. I just can’t seem to come to hate them as the invasive species they are, so lets take a closer look at one of the most familiar birds in suburbia.

The House Sparrow (Passer domesticus), as its scientific name indicates, formed a special relationship with Homo sapiens shortly after people in the Middle East started farming. They are thought to have originally been migratory, but they appear to have lost that ability over many generations as they evolved the habit of over-wintering close to settlements and feeding on grain stores, garbage, and other materials made available by human activities. In fact the birds have become so sedentary, that most adult birds today live within 1.5 – 2 miles of their birthplace.

Sparrow populations grew especially large in cities when horses and their seed-rich droppings were common. This universally familiar in appearance and widespread sparrow can now be found worldwide where it is closely tied to areas of human habitation, in either urban or rural settings. They can survive on city sidewalks or in farmlands, but avoid extensive woodlands, native grasslands, and deserts away from human development.

Several attempts were made to introduce the House Sparrow to North America, primarily for two reasons — people considered the bird attractive and because it was hoped the bird would help control an insect pest that was killing trees. This obviously didn’t work since the bird is a primarily a seedeater. The first successful introduction was made in Brooklyn shortly after 1850, and like the Starling it spread rapidly, taking only 50 years to occupy suitable habitats over the entire United States.

In the early 1900’s the House Sparrow was the most abundant species in the US except in densely forested, alpine and desert regions. It began to decrease in abundance with the advent of the automobile and the decline of the horse, especially in eastern urban areas. This is presumably because of the disappearance of grain fed to horses. The sparrow is still abundant in agricultural area where you will find them in close proximity to farm buildings. North American Christmas bird counts indicate the bird is still declining and in England it can be difficult to find now.

The House Sparrow has been present in North America long enough for evolution to have influenced their morphology. Within a short time after their introduction, these sparrows adapted to the local environment. Thus the sparrows of the rainy climate of Vancouver, British Columbia, are plump, dark birds, whereas those inhabiting Death Valley, California, are slim, pale, sand-colored birds. Populations in the north are larger than those in the south, as is generally true for native species (a relationship known as Bergman’s Rule). These changes took less than 60 years.

House sparrows eat various kinds of seeds supplemented by some insects. Rural birds tend to eat more waste seed from animal dung and seed from fields, while urban birds tend to eat more commercial birdseed, weed seed, and discarded scraps of human food such as bread, chips, etc.

One odd but interesting fact about these sparrows is that they can swim if they need to, such as to escape a predator. Sparrows caught in a trap over a water dish have been known to try to escape by diving into the water and swimming underwater from one part of the trap to another.

The House Sparrow is extremely hygienic. It is a frequent dust bather, throwing soil and dust over its body feathers, just as if it were bathing with water.

Besides being introduced to North America by humans the House Sparrow shares another interesting characteristic with the European Starling. Like the starling the sparrow’s plumage changes as the edges of its feathers wear away. If you see a male bird in the late summer and fall it won’t have as noticeable a black bib as it does in the breeding season, which can start as early as February. That’s because when the birds molt the new throat feathers are edged with a light brown. Over time these edges wear away and reveal the dark throat bib that we use to recognize the bird.

So, why is this adaptable, human loving species reviled by birders and non-birders alike? Frank Chapman, a prominent early 20th century ornithologist, referred to them as ‘street urchins’ and ‘feathered rats’ primary because of

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House Sparrows

its aggressiveness. Males and females form permanent pair bonds and fiercely defend their nesting territory. Since they are cavity-nesting birds they are in direct competition with many beloved backyard birds especially bluebirds. They not only destroy nests of other birds but they will also eat their eggs and kill nestlings. Also because of their adaptability and close association with human habitation they will commandeer just about any hole in signs, buildings, lampposts, etc. to raise their brood. This means people have to dodge a lot of bird poop, which does not endear these birds to humans.

So how does one deal with unwanted House Sparrows? Since these birds are an introduced species, they are not protected by law, which means you may remove and destroy nests, eggs and birds. But an ounce of prevention is always worth a pound of cure. Don’t offer seed mix that contains cracked-corn or white proso millet, the little round seed that come in many mixtures. If you want to attract juncos, native sparrows and/or mourning doves then offer seed mixes with less than 35% millet and 15% cracked corn. And of course never offer bread. If you scatter seed on the ground make sure you scatter it in an area that has a lot of cover – under trees and bushes. House Sparrows like starlings tend to shy away from a lot of natural cover (cars don’t count). If you still have problems try some of the ‘gadgets’ and tips found on the Managing House Sparrow site (http://www.sialis.org/hosp.htm#theproblem). Be forewarned though, the person responsible for this site is a bluebird aficionado and some of the information given about House Sparrows is incorrect and/or inflated. But some of the gadgets and tips for discouraging the birds are very helpful.

We should keep in mind that humans are responsible for bringing these birds to our own doorsteps. For some urban dwellers they may be one of the few ‘wild things’ those people ever encounter. Their cheery chattering does brighten up a pretty bleak urban landscape. And you have to admire them for their tenacity and adaptability, which has allowed them to inhabit our urban deserts!

Have you ever wondered -

How do birds sleep without falling off of their perch?

A bird’s ability to grasp a branch with its toes is due to the action of tendons in its leg that are pulled tight when a bird crouches on a perch. The tendons are attached to muscles above the bird's heel – the joint that appears to us as a “backward-bending knee” in the portion of the leg not covered by feathers. These flexor tendons, as they are called, run down the backs of the legs and to the tips of the toes. When the bird sits, the tendons pull on the toes and close them tightly, like a fist. This automatic grip is strong enough to allow the bird to sleep while perching. The same mechanism is at work when a raptor seizes an animal, serving to clench the talons and pierce the prey on impact.

Make Your 2008 Birding Count

Continued from page 1

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2) send it as an attachment to Marek Smith whose email is on the sheet; or 3) copy and paste the info into an email message to MAS-L. If you have some spare time and some computer skills, you could volunteer to input the data received into the database. You would have to go to the Conservation Science Office but it’s in a lovely setting and you might get to see a few interesting birds there as well.

During that September meeting Marek also mentioned some undeveloped properties in the county that have the potential for becoming nature preserves. Currently there are 14 nature preserves totaling 5,783 acres, out of the 17,000-acre park system. The addition of six suggested sites would bring the nature preserve acreage total to approximately 6,800 acres, or roughly 40% of the park system. The properties under consideration include:

1. Stevens Creek - 225 acres, mostly forested; protects a tributary of Goose Creek and the endangered Carolina Heelsplitter which can be found downstream; near I-485 between Mint Hill and Matthews
2. Sherman Branch [a.k.a. Moore Farm] - 210 acres, forest and grasslands; on the eastside of the county at Camp Stewart Rd. & Rocky River Church Rd.
3. Gateway - 137 acres, mostly forested; along Catawba River, south of Hwy 74 bridge
4. Berryhill - 160 acres, mostly forested; along Paw Creek and Catawba River
5. Oehler - 151 acres, forest and grasslands; in the northeast portion of the county on Huntersville-Concord Rd.
6. Davis Farm - 140 acres, forest and grasslands; in the Mallard Creek area on Hucks Rd.

To help bolster the case for protecting these properties as nature preserves the folks at DNR need as much data on these properties as pos-
The fascinating story of Hawk Mountain Sanctuary in Drehersville, Pennsylvania is a poignant one and that is how it is told here by Maurice Broun, the first curator of the sanctuary. The tale begins in 1929 when an amateur ornithologist, Richard Pough, witnessed gunners shooting hundreds of birds of prey at the site during what is now the famed autumn migration. Horrified, he showed photographs of the massacre to Rosalie Barrow Edge, a conservationist, who made the “mountain” and the future of raptor protection her life’s mission.

She organized a committee to save the mountain, first by leasing the land and then purchasing it. The sanctuary sits on the Kittatinny Ridge in the eastern center of the state. The entire ridge extends from southeastern New York across five states and is a significant portion of the Appalachian Flyway.

Maurice Broun learned of the depredation of hawks in the small town of Pennsylvania’s Blue Mountain ridge. Appalled by the situation, he left his job with the Massachusetts Department of Agriculture, being drawn to Drehersville to “turn the shambles into a sanctuary.” He tells of his days as the curator from 1934 through 1966 in which he and his wife, Irma, struggled to change region’s destructive attitudes towards the increasingly threatened birds of prey. Through all this, they had to contend with the primitive living conditions, gun-toting trespassers, and even a few “ghosts.”

Their tireless efforts meant so much for the education and preservation of raptors. The sanctuary became a beacon for other scientists and conservationists such and Rachel Carson and Roger Tory Peterson. The book goes into detail about the migration which runs from August 15 through December 15, the science of air travel (thermals, currents, weather fronts, etc), the topography of the 2,600-acre sanctuary and its continuous ridge, along with what raptors can be expected (almost down to the day). It has become a role model in raptor conservation science and is responsible for one of the first major data bases for raptor numbers in the east.

If you haven’t been to Hawk Mountain Sanctuary, this book will undoubtedly make you want to go. It’s worth the read … and the trip!

Review by Carol Tomko
Some states monitor the salt levels to those with high blood pressure. Sodium concentrations in drink seepage into groundwater. Elevated ily contaminated by salty runoff or as well. In rural areas, wells are eas 1,000 birds each. them reporting the deaths of over deaths due to roadside salt, two of them reporting the deaths of over 1,000 birds each.

Salt on roads, sidewalks and driveways can enter air, soil, groundwater, and surface water from snowmelt runoff, release from surface soils, and wind-spray. Trees and plants are damaged by road salt, even when salt is applied as far away as 600 feet from the road. Studies have shown salt sensitivity in 50.8% of woody plant species in Canada; many of these have disappeared from Canadian roadsides. Salt can interfere with the flowering, seed germination, roots, and stems of roadside plant species. Birds can mistake salt particles for food, resulting in fatality. In 2000, Environment Canada had 12 reports of bird deaths due to roadside salt, two of them reporting the deaths of over 1,000 birds each.

Salt carries risks for human health as well. In rural areas, wells are easily contaminated by salty runoff or seepage into groundwater. Elevated sodium concentrations in drinking water can pose a health risk to those with high blood pressure. Some states monitor the salt levels in drinking water, but there is no federal legislation requiring universal monitoring. The chlorine in salt has a corrosive effect on automobile parts, another safety consideration. Sand or kitty litter, sometimes also used as alternatives, create other hazards in the environment, as they do not break down and can clog storm drains. One good alternative is calcium magnesium acetate (CMA), which is less harmful to the environment. Unfortunately CMA is more costly than salt, but the initial outlay of money can prevent the later costs associated with repairing the environment.

In the winter, is it safe to use salt to melt icy sidewalks and driveways? I have also heard of people using kitty litter; is that a greener solution? -- Submitted by Joe C. of St. Paul, MN

Tips for the Novice Birder: Finding Birds

Move Quietly: Birds are not necessarily disturbed by noises, but you may be distracted by them. Often the first clue to a bird’s presence is some small rustling of leaves or soft call notes. Any noise or distraction, such as conversation or swishing clothing, can prevent you from noticing these signs.

Travel Gently: Birds are extremely sensitive to abrupt movements. A sudden wave of the hand, such as that made when raising binoculars or pointing a finger, can scare off a bird more surely than almost any other action.

Travel Slowly: One can often see more birds by standing in one spot than by moving quickly and covering a lot of ground.

Watch for movement: This requires holding still and looking with a ‘wide field’ – not focusing on a particular spot. Once you detect a movement, even if you’re not sure what caused it, you may find it useful to aim your binoculars at the spot and try to find a bird.

Watch the edges of a flock and pay special attention to outlying birds or those that act differently; these may be different species. Behavior offers clues that can be a great help in finding and identifying birds, and noticing behavior is the way to learn these clues.

Let the Birds Find Predators: Bird’s extraordinary alertness and eyesight can aid a birder. The scolding calls of chickadees, jays,

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Ask Audubon

"In the winter, is it safe to use salt to melt icy sidewalks and driveways? I have also heard of people using kitty litter; is that a greener solution? -- Submitted by Joe C. of St. Paul, MN

This is a tough question - icy roads and sidewalks are clearly dangerous, but the salt used to keep them safe for walking and driving pose environmental dangers. The amount of salt poured into our ecosystem is staggering. According to the National Research Council (NRC), between 8 and 12 million tons of road-salt is used in the United States per year.

Salt on roads, sidewalks and driveways can enter air, soil, groundwater, and surface water from snowmelt runoff, release from surface soils, and wind-spray. Trees and plants are damaged by road salt, even when salt is applied as far away as 600 feet from the road. Studies have shown salt sensitivity in 50.8% of woody plant species in Canada; many of these have disappeared from Canadian roadsides. Salt can interfere with the flowering, seed germination, roots, and stems of roadside plant species. Birds can mistake salt particles for food, resulting in fatality. In 2000, Environment Canada had 12 reports of bird deaths due to roadside salt, two of them reporting the deaths of over 1,000 birds each.

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Salt carries risks for human health as well. In rural areas, wells are easily contaminated by salty runoff or seepage into groundwater. Elevated sodium concentrations in drinking water can pose a health risk to those with high blood pressure. Some states monitor the salt levels in drinking water, but there is no federal legislation requiring universal monitoring. The chlorine in salt has a corrosive effect on automobile parts, another safety consideration. Sand or kitty litter, sometimes also used as alternatives, create other hazards in the environment, as they do not break down and can clog storm drains.

One good alternative is calcium magnesium acetate (CMA), which is less harmful to the environment. Unfortunately CMA is more costly than salt, but the initial outlay of money can prevent the later costs associated with repairing the environment.

Some municipalities use a combination of salt and CMA in an effort to mitigate environmental damage as well as contain costs. A Department of Public Works study concluded that every additional dollar spent on the use of a 4 to 1 mixture of sodium chloride and a salt alternative will result in a savings of at least two dollars in environmental costs. In addition, simply reducing the amount of salt you add to the environment by using only as much salt as you really need to keep your driveway and walkway clear will also help.

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Finding Birds

or crows are often your first clue to the presence of a hawk or owl. Learn these sounds and track them down. Similarly, the alarm calls and evasive actions of small birds may also signal the presence of a hawk or owl. If all the birds at your feeder suddenly take off in a flurry of wingbeats and urgent high-pitched call notes, leaving the scene deserted and silent, you can be pretty sure that a hawk or other predator has just visited. A careful search of the ground or of nearby perches might reveal it, and the habit of looking out quickly when these sounds are heard will help you see a hawk in the future. Take note when you see a shorebird cock it’s head to study something in the sky above. Look for whatever has caught the bird’s attention and you may discover a high-flying raptor.

Watch Flock Behavior: The takeoff of a flock of birds, or the coordinated movements of a flock of sandpipers in the air, takes on a certain urgency in the presence of a hawk. Many small birds react to an aerial predator by forming a tight flock and swerving back and forth around it, not allowing it to get above them or to single out one member of the flock. Starlings do this more dramatically and more persistently than other birds. The sight of a distant ‘starling ball’ is often the first clue to the presence of a hawk.

(from Sibley’s Birding Basics)

Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. -- Rachel Carson --

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xeno-canto: bird songs from tropical america
http://www.xeno-canto.org/index.php

For those who may be contemplating a trip south of border this site will help you become familiar with the sounds of the birds you may encounter. Even if you are not planning your dream trip because this site deals with neo-tropic birds a good number of the birds that breed here in the summer are included such as tanagers, warblers, flycatchers, etc. It’s also fun to ‘see’ what’s going on in the birding community outside of the US.

Mecklenburg Audubon Society

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.

For the Wired Birder

xeno-canto: bird songs from tropical america
http://www.xeno-canto.org/index.php

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Audubon News is published monthly from September through May by the Mecklenburg Audubon Society, a chapter of National Audubon. Local members receive the newsletter via postal mail and/or electronic mail. It is also posted on the Mecklenburg Audubon web site - meckbirds.org.
Audubon News
P.O. Box 221093
Charlotte, NC 28222

Activities Calendar

1/3 Member’s Photos and Potluck
1/5 Ribbon Walk Nature Preserve (Park & Rec Field Trip)
1/12 Latta Plantation Preserve (1/2 Day Field Trip)
1/19 Huntington Beach State Park, SC (Full Day Field Trip)
1/24 McMullen Creek Greenway (1/2 Day Field Trip)
1/26 McAlpine Creek Greenway (1/2 Day Field Trip)
1/26 Grand Opening of the Reedy Creek Biodiversity Center
1/26 Carolina Hike Series: Pee Dee NWR (Park & Rec Event)
1/26 Audubon Adventures (Monthly Meeting)
1/26 Audubon Adventures (Monthly Meeting)

Silent Auction

Every year we sponsor 35+ Audubon Adventures classroom activities, which costs about $1,500. To help offset some of these expenses, we decided to try something new at January meeting - a silent auction.

Erica Owens and Tammy Hamilton have been working on this for just a few months and have gathered together some very nice items. So if you still have some spare change burning a hole in your pocket after all your holiday shopping, bring it to the meeting. You might find a special item to give to yourself!

2/7 Audubon Adventures (Monthly Meeting)
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Myron & Robyn Clark
Charles S. Sevcik

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