Monthly Meeting

The Buzz about Bees

You already know that birds do a lot of communicating through their songs, especially in the spring. But how much do you know about another common and very important winged denizen of your backyard – the honeybee? Do know a waggle dance when you see one? Would know what to do if you saw a vibration signal? These are two important ways bees communicate but what do they mean? If you don’t, you need to come and hear this month’s speaker - Dr. Stan Schneider, Professor in the Biology Department at UNC Charlotte.

Dr. Schneider specializes in communication and foraging behavior of bees. He will share with us some of the honeybees natural history as well discuss how important these tiny creatures are to the health of our environment. Recently he and his graduate students have discovered some very interesting information about who really controls the hive, which he will share with us as well.

So dance your way over to the fellowship hall of the Sharon Seventh Day Adventist Church (920 Sharon Amity) around 7:30 PM (refreshments start at 7:15 PM) on Thursday, March 6th. I am sure everyone will be a buzz with anticipation about this great program.

Audubon at Home:

Lawn Pesticides – An Unacceptable Risk

Professor of Entomology at Cornell University, estimates that seven million wild birds are killed each year due to the aesthetic use of pesticides by homeowners. Most pesticides are generally not species specific, killing non-targeted beneficial insects and important pollinators and food sources in their wake. Accidental pesticide applications or ‘drift’ into aquatic areas is a common problem, causing contamination or loss of an important food source for animals as well as humans.

If you haven’t already done so, making the transition from chemical treatments to natural lawn maintenance may take a little time, but putting it into practice is easier than you think. Soil health should always be the primary concern because years of heavy pesticide use may have destroyed many beneficial organisms that provided natural pest control, soil aeration and plant nutrition. Here are a few suggestions to get you started.

A soil rebuilding and natural lawn program should include aeration and compost applications, seeding with grasses best suited to your soil type, and regular mowing to maintain a healthy and attractive lawn.

Here’s a few things to think about now that we are getting out in our yards more.

Domestic usage of pesticides now accounts for the majority of wildlife poisonings reported to the EPA. David Pimentel,
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!!

**Six Mile Creek Greenway**  
**Thursday, March 6th: ½-day - Easy**

Join Dave for a half-day of winter birding along Six Mile Creek in southern Mecklenburg County. This is a paved, easy, one-mile walk along a quiet greenway, which is a perfect setting for resident wintering birds like hermit thrush and winter wren.

Meet in the parking lot at 8:30 AM. There are no facilities but we should be done by 11:30 AM. For those who wish, we will have lunch after at Earth Fare's great soup, sandwich, and salad bar. If going contact Dave Lovett at birdsalot@webtv.net.

**Cowan's Ford Refuge**  
**Saturday, March 8th: ½-day - Moderate**

Join Mike Kirschman this Saturday morning for birding at our local Important Bird Area. We will be searching for wintering birds and waterfowl. Usually the refuge is home to good numbers of sparrows and raptors are common including a possible northern harrier.

We will meet at the viewing stand at 8 AM. If going contact Mike at Kman613@yahoo.com. FYI there are no facilities at the refuge.

**Morrow Mountain State Park**  
**Saturday, March 15th: Full Day - Moderate**

This will be our third year of making the trek east to Morrow Mt. State Park to wrap up our winter season of field trips.

Always very accommodating, the staff at Morrow has made available their community clubhouse for us, and will assist in pointing us in the right direction to locate the better birding spots in the park. Pack a lunch - the clubhouse has a fridge and a microwave if you want something hot. We should finish up in the late afternoon for our drive back to Charlotte.

If you can go, contact park ranger Ron Anundson at 704-982-4402 or Ron.anundson@ncmail.net so he has an idea of how many will participate. Ron has offered to have a pot of coffee ready for us. Meet at the park office (follow the signs) at 8:30 AM.

**Draper Wildlife Management Area/Lake Oliphant, SC**  
**Thursday, March 20th: Full day - Moderate**

Kick-off the spring season with a trip south to farming country southwest of York, SC Located close to historic Brattonsville, we will bird the open fields, ponds and woods of Draper WMA. After Draper, we will take a short idyllic drive thru farm country to check out Lake Oliphant for waterfowl and shorebirds.

Pack a lunch for a picnic at the lake. We should wrap up around 3:30 for the drive back to Charlotte. Meet in the parking lot of the Crossroads Mall, located off the main entrance to Carowinds Amusement Park at 8 AM. Be sure you have plenty of gas, as we will be in the country.

Contact Dave Lovett at birdsalot@webtv.net if you plan on going.
Mallard Creek Greenway  
Saturday, March 22nd: ½-day - Easy

Mallard Creek Greenway stretches for over 6 miles from W. Mallard Creek Rd. at the corner of UNCC to well past Mallard Creek Elementary School through a variety of habitats - weedy fields, wetlands, deciduous woods. The area attracts lots of sparrows, bluebirds, woodpeckers, raptors, and wrens. If the birding gods are smiling on us we may even be able to discover a few early migrants like a parula or waterthrush.

We’ll meet at the McDonalds across from the University City hospital on N. Tryon at 8 AM. Let Judy know if you plan to go at birdwalker@mac.com.

Four Hole Swamp/Magnolia Gardens  
Sat./Sun., March 29th & 39th: Weekend - Moderate

Run away to the low-country this weekend for some great birding. On Saturday we will visit Four Hole Swamp in Francis Beidler Forrest. Step back in time as we bird down the boardwalk, overhung by towering virgin stands of tupelo and bald cypress, some at least 1,000 years old. Newly arrived Prothonotary and hooded warblers should be actively and vocally seeking new mates for the nesting season.

After an evening in Summerville, SC, we will join Perry Nugent - an excellent birder- for his regular morning bird walk at Magnolia Plantation. Our group rate for this walk including entrance to the gardens is $17. After the morning walk we will tour the Audubon Swamp Walk located on the plantation, which has a large, active herony. We will head home to Charlotte in the late afternoon.

Pack a lunch for Saturday; lunch is available at Magnolia for Sunday. Our evening in Summerville will be at the Comfort Inn - Summerville ($80.99 AARP or AAA) - 843-851-2333.

We will meet at the visitor center of Francis Beidler Forrest at 10 AM. Contact Dave Lovett at birdsalot@webtv.net if you plan on going and for more details.

GBBC Games/Contests

Now that you’ve sharpened your keen eye for spotting birds with last weekend’s GBBC, test your skills of observation! Find five differences between two seemingly identical photos with Eagle Eyes, Audubon’s latest online game. See if you can beat Newswire’s editor-she only scored 30 points! http://audubon.org/gbbc/game/index.php

Calling all artists - 17 and under

Submit your bird pictures and paintings to Audubon’s Great Backyard Bird Count Art Exhibit! Selected artwork will be displayed on Audubon’s web site starting April 1, 2008, and others may be exhibited at local Audubon Centers and other Audubon locales. Visit http://www.audubon.org/gbbc/Art_contest.shtml for submission guidelines.
A Murder of Crows Is Just a Flock!!

Widespread, common, and obvious, the American Crow is known by most people. Because of their raucous calls and affinity to move around in family groups, they have gotten a bad rap in some areas. What is less well known is how complex its life is. Young crows remain with their parents until they can find a home of their own, and individual relationships may last years. They are a very social species and live in large extended family groups that defend their territories aggressively. The following information has been adapted from a FAQ web page by Dr. Kevin J. McGowan, a professor at Cornell University (http://www.birds.cornell.edu/crows/crowfaq.html).

One of the great animal phenomena of the world is the congregation of large numbers of birds into a single group to sleep together. Such communal sleeping groups are known as “roosts.” For crows, roosts are primarily a fall and winter thing. Numbers peak in winter and then decrease near the beginning of the breeding season (usually in March). It appears that all crows will join winter roosts, even territorial breeding crows. Most breeding crows sleep on their territories during the breeding season, but join the roosts afterward.

Just why birds congregate in such large groups is still largely a matter of conjecture. A number of hypotheses have been constructed to explain it:

One is that the birds simply are congregating in the most favorable spot (protection from predators, protection from the elements, the only trees suitable for roosting, etc.), and they don’t mind doing it with a bunch of other birds. This idea is kind of analogous to a crowded hotel: everyone has the same needs being met at the same place, but no one is really interacting with anyone else.

Another idea is that the birds get some protection from predators by being in a large group. This is the “wagontrain” analogy: safety in numbers. Crows are most afraid of large owls, and sleeping with a bunch of other crows could afford some protection for an individual crow.

Another idea is the information center hypothesis, where information about profitable foraging areas is transmitted. The idea is that an individual that did poorly foraging for itself on one day can watch for other individuals coming in to the roost that look fat and happy, that obviously found some rich source of food. Then the hungry individual can either backtrack the happy ones’ flight paths, or follow them out first thing in the morning to the good food source.

Another food related idea is the patch-sitting hypothesis. This theory is similar to the first one mentioned, in that roosts congregate around a large, non-defendable, reliable food source. So, first thing and last thing in the day, food is available. It need not be the best food, but it is something to eat to get them going. The birds can then disperse out and do whatever they need to do, having had some kind of breakfast first. Roosts, then, will form in suitable roosting habitat near these large food sources. For crows, such abundant sources might be landfills, commercial composting facilities, or certain types of agricultural fields.

Crows have been congregating in large roosts in the fall and winter for as long as there have been crows. Crow roosts can range from small scattered roosts of under one hundred individuals to the spectacularly large roosts of hundreds of thousands, or even more than a million crows! A roost in Fort Cobb, Oklahoma was estimated to hold over two million crows. Most roosts are much smaller, but roosts of tens of thousands are common.

Before heading to roost, crows will congregate in some area away from the final roosting site, usually an hour or two before complete darkness. Here the crows spend a lot of time calling, chasing, and fighting. Right at dark the main body of the group will move toward the final roosting spot. Sometimes this final movement is relatively quiet, but usually it is still quite noisy. I have seen crows coming together from several separate congregation areas, heading to one final staging area where they all coalesce, then everyone heads to the final roost. The final roost can be a cohesive group in a single woodlot, or it can be rather diffusely spread out over quite a wide area of suitable trees.

A number of possible explanations exist for the relatively recent influx of roosting crows into urban areas. A couple of things may have worked together to get crows into
A Murder of Crows

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town (both for nesting and roosting).

First in 1972 the Federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 was extended to cover crows. It is possible that this change may have resulted in the decrease of shooting pressure on crows, allowing them to become more tolerant of the presence of people.

Secondly, the prohibition on the discharge of firearms within city/village limits. It is conceivable that crows somehow stumbled across the fact that they could not be shot in cities because of local ordinances against shooting in town.

Once crows overcame the urban barrier, a number of possible advantages could extend to them:

• Cities are warmer than rural areas. In most places a difference of 5-10 degrees F exists, sometimes referred to as a “heat bubble” over cities. Because roosting is a winter phenomenon, warmer spots could be important.

• Great Horned Owl populations are usually lower in urban areas. Next to people with guns, Great Horned Owls pose the largest danger to an adult crow. Great Horned Owls take adults as well as nestling crows with great regularity. (That is why crows hate them so much!) Owls probably are regular attendants at crow roosts, as owls wake up as the crows are heading into the roosts, and sleeping crows should be pretty easy picking.

• Artificial light assist crows in watching for owls. It makes sense for crows to like “nightlights” to protect them from their biggest bogeyman, the Great Horned Owl. Crows don’t see well at night; owls do. Crows near street light could see approaching owls.

• Urban areas provide large trees for roosts. In many places some of the largest trees to be found are in urban areas.

Once crows have decided to come to your yard, it might be hard to convince them to leave. Plastic owl decoys will work, ... for about 15 minutes. A dog could be more effective, especially if it was encouraged to chase them. If, however, something really special was attracting the crows to the yard (like readily available food), the crows probably will figure out how to avoid the dog and get it. The idea is to make the yard an unattractive place for the crows. Chase them when possible and make it obvious that you are after THEM, not just going out in the yard for other reasons (it will make a difference, trust me, but see below for the associated risks of this technique).

Killing the crows is not a recommended option. It can be done legally only in a few areas (out of the city, and with permits or a hunting license). But, if one family of crows found your yard desirable, chances are others will too. Crow society is filled with excess crows that are waiting for an opportunity to breed (the helpers staying home and helping the parents raise young). If you kill some territory holders off, you just create a breeding opportunity for the crows waiting in the wings.

A far better solution is to work on your own attitudes, not the crows’. Crows are not evil, and they are not purposely trying to torment you. They are just being crows, trying to live their lives and feed their families. Actual property destruction is one thing that might require action, but just being annoying is something else again. Try to appreciate the crows for the fascinating creatures they are.

Crows do have one endearing characteristic that is apparently not shared by other birds. They will get to know people as individuals. While you can get chickadees to eat out of your hand, any old hand will do, and I suspect that the chickadees do not know you as an individual. Crows will! If you toss them peanuts (I recommend unsalted, in the shell) on a regular basis, they will wait and watch for you. Not just any person, but you. If you do this often enough, they will follow you down the street to get more. I have made a point of getting on the good side of a number of crow families around Ithaca. Some will follow my car down the street, and if I don’t notice them and toss them peanuts they will dash across the windshield to let me know they are there. Some of these crows recognize me far from their home territories, way out of context. (It did, however, take some of them a long time to learn to recognize my new car.) So indulge yourself and make some personal friends with the crows. That is the preferred relationship, because they also are happy to turn this talent of recognition to the darker side, and treat you as an enemy. (Again, not just all people, but YOU.) Because I climb to crow nests to band young birds, many other crows in Ithaca know me and hate me. Whenever they notice me in their territory they will come over and yell at me. They will follow me around and keep yelling for as long as I am there. Believe me, it’s better to be on their good side than their bad side!
Before you do any traveling to see birds, you need to stop and think like a bird that is going to fly hundreds, if not thousands, of miles. Thank goodness we don’t have to rely on our own arm-power every time we want to go birding, but we should prepare ourselves the way birds do, especially if we are going to be out all day in the elements. Here are a few things to think about before going birding for hours in the middle of nowhere or with limited facilities.

Many birds eat like there’s no tomorrow before they migrate. You don’t need to go to the same extreme but you should consider making an effort to drink more water before you leave for a field trip. Nutritionists recommend that you drink eight glasses of pure water everyday. If you venture out with a hydrated body, you are less likely to run out of energy too soon. Remember that’s water – not coffee, soda or beer. Those beverages are diuretics and will cause you to lose more fluids. And of course always carry some water with you, regardless of how long you think you are going to be out.

Like birds, you need to fuel your body while you are out and about. Pack very portable snacks like unsalted peanuts, fresh and/or dried fruit, veggies like carrots, or low-fat granola bars. If you eat small servings of protein, simple sugars, and carbohydrates throughout the day, your body will receive the nutrients you need to keep moving. With the extra physical effort that active birding can demand, you will benefit from these healthy fuel-ups.

Birds do a lot of resting as well as eating. You should too. Try to get more sleep several days before a trip. More often than not you will be getting up earlier and doing a lot more walking and standing than you usually do. So the more rested your body is the better you will feel.

It doesn’t matter whether your trip is just a morning stroll along a greenway or a weekend at the beach, thinking like a migrating bird will make each outing much more enjoyable. So don’t forget to rest, eat and drink and you will have a merry time birding.

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This book, written in a style that will appeal to non-scientist birders, includes everything needed in an excellent college textbook for the course in Conservation Biology that I teach at UNC-Charlotte. To illustrate the style, here is the first paragraph:

*When you see a Red-cockaded Woodpecker for the first time, it is not obvious why this bird has received so much attention. It is a small, rather nondescript species. It does not have brilliant plumage or engage in spectacular displays. It utters no bizarre calls. Only when you begin to understand the complexities of its ecology and social behavior do you come to appreciate what a gift of nature the Red-cockaded Woodpecker represents.*

The three authors spent many decades studying the social biology of the RCW and successfully discovering the methods necessary to stop its decline toward extinction. They give us twelve highly readable chapters that share enough knowledge to “begin to understand” and “come to appreciate” the RCW.

The authors’ dedication to the RCW is obvious as they blend their writing styles into a seamless and fascinating story that begins with history, dwells on biology, and ends with politics. We now know everything necessary to rescue the RCW from extinction. Whether we accomplish this goal depends on one thing, having the societal will to do it. To end with the book’s last sentence:

*What happens to the Red-cockaded Woodpecker in the coming decades will be a critical test of our society’s philosophy and commitment to conservation, and will determine the heritage that we leave for future generations.*

Many of you may have received new optics for Christmas, so this is a follow-up to a question asked at the December equipment festival — what is the best way to clean your binoculars. These words of wisdom come from Bill Thompson III, editor of Bird Watcher’s Digest and lifelong bird watcher.

Optics Cleaning Kit should include:

1. soft hair-bristle brush for whisking away dust, bread, crumbs, sand, and any other abrasive particles that might damage lens coatings or surfaces when you are wiping the lenses with a cloth.

2. soft cleaning cloth, preferably one designed specifically for cleaning coated glass surfaces. Lens tissues will work, but they don’t seem to get things as clean as a soft, cloth.

3. small bottle of lens cleaning fluid. The fluid should also be designed for use on coated lens surfaces — no Windex.

Most optics manufacturers sell cleaning kits with their birding optics. These kits are also available from your eye doctor, though a brush may not be included.

Now how to clean them:

1. Hold the binoculars upright and, brushing up from underneath, use the soft hair-bristle brush to whisk off any particulate matter. Brushing from below allows you to use our friend gravity to your advantage.

2. Inspect the brushed-off lenses and repeat the brushing until all crumbs & dust are removed.

3. Spray a light coating of lens cleaner on your cleaning cloth and apply to the lens with a light circular motion.

4. In cases of extreme grunge, spray the cleaner directly onto the lens and let it soak for a few seconds to loosen up anything adhered to the glass surface. Make sure your cleaning solution is intended for use with coated optics. You may need to repeat the fluid-cloth step to remove all the streaking.

5. As a last step, a quick fogging breath onto the lens and a few soft swipes with the cleaning cloth will remove any streaking or residue from the cleaning solutions.

6. To check out your work, tilt the binoculars so the light reflects off the surface (you will be looking at the lens from a 45°). Any remaining streaks will be easy to spot and attack.

Now go find some birds and enjoy your clearer, brighter, greatly improved outlook.

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Lawn Pesticides

area, corn gluten for pre-emergence weed control, biological controls for insects if necessary, and one or more applications annually of slow-release nitrogen organic fertilizer. Other important steps to take are mowing high at 2-3 inches, deep watering early in the morning, and performing periodic soil tests to determine needed amendments, such as lime or rock dust. If you use a lawn care service, look for a company that follows a program such as the one described above. Be aware that IPM (Integrated Pest Management) programs may include the use of toxic pesticides. Your decision to stop using pesticides benefits not only your immediate family, but your neighbors, pets and wildlife in your community.

For more information visit: Audubon at Home (www.audubon.org/bird/at_home)
Activities Calendar

3/1  Evergreen Nature Preserve Clean-up
3/6  6 Mile Creek (1/2 day Field Trip)
3/6  The Buzz about Bees (Monthly Meeting)
3/8  Cowan’s Ford Refuge (1/2 Day Field Trip)
3/15 Morrow Mt. St. Park (Full Day Field Trip)
3/20 Draper WMA/Lake Oliphant (Full Day Field Trip)
3/22 Mallard Creek Greenway (1/2 Day Field Trip)
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)
4/18-20 Santee Nature Festival
4/19  Beginning Bird Walker (McAlpine Creek Greenway) (1/2 Day Field Trip)

Name That Bird! Answers
Flying Cigar (Chimney Swift); Fire Bird (Scarlet Tanager)
Skunk Head (White-crowned Sparrow); Marsh Quail (Sora)
Rice Bird (Bobolink); Thistle Bird (American Goldfinch)
English Parrot (Evening Grosbeak); Butcher Bird (Shrike)
Swamp Angel (Prothonotary Warbler); Timberdoodle (Woodcock)

Audubon News
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Who’s New?
Karin Huntley
Norma MacKenzie

There is a Starbucks Coffee advertisement.

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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.

Name

Phone

Address [Street, City, ST, and Zip]

E-mail

☐ Individual Membership [$10]
☐ Family Membership [$15]
☐ 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.

Return to:
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