February can be a hard month for birders. It can be cold and damp and not much moving around in the field. Winter migrants have settled in, and the advent of spring migration is still a couple of months off. So what’s a birder to do to keep their identification skills sharp? Enter a new 21st century innovation to birding – the Internet! The Internet tools now available to birders are revolutionizing the way folks learn about birds, just like Roger Tory Peterson’s field guides did in the 20th century.

Anyone can take part in the Great Backyard Bird Count, from novice bird watchers to experts. Participants count birds for as little as 15 minutes (or as long as they wish) on one or more days of the event and report their sightings online at www.birdcount.org. One 2009 participant said, “Thank you for the opportunity to participate in citizen science. I have had my eyes opened to a whole new interest and I love it!”

“The GBBC is a perfect first step towards the sort of intensive monitoring needed to discover how birds are responding to environmental change,” said Janis Dickinson, the director of Citizen Science at the Cornell Lab. “Winter is such a vulnerable period for birds, so winter bird distributions are likely to be very sensitive to change. There is only one way—citizen science—to gather data on private lands where people live and GBBC has been doing this across the continent for many years. GBBC has enormous potential both as an early warning system and in capturing and engaging people in more intensive sampling of birds across the landscape.”

Bird populations are always shifting and changing. For example, 2009 GBBC data highlighted a huge southern invasion of Pine Siskins across much of the eastern United States. Participants counted 279,469 Pine Siskins on

Continued on page 6
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 web site - meckbirds.org/trips.html. Please remember to contact the trip leader 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!!

**KEY TO PHYSICAL DIFFICULTY**

*Easy* - Trails are level to slight grades usually paved. .5-1.5 miles of walking;

*Moderate* - Trails can be uneven with some hills. 1-2.5 miles of walking;

*Strenuous* - Trails vary greatly. 2.5+ miles of walking; * - Trails are handicapped accessible.

---

**Saturday, Jan. 30, 2010: Mallard Creek Greenway**

1/2 Day (Easy) • Contact: Judy Walker [birdwalker@mac.com]

This little birded greenway in the University area has potentially good habitat for sparrows and other winter visitors. We will meet at 8:30 AM at the University City McDonalds on Hwy. 29 across from the University Hospital.

**Sunday, Feb. 7, 2010: McDowell Prairie/Copperhead Island**

2/3 Day (Moderate) • Contact: Ron Clark [waxwing@bellsouth.net]

We will spend most of the morning birding the prairie, and then check the woods and river around Copperhead Island. We should find some wintering waterfowl there. After grabbing a bite of lunch at a local eatery, we will then bird the short Walker Branch Greenway nearby.

Parking is very limited at the prairie, so we will meet in front of the Harris-Teeter at the corner of Highways 160 and 49, at 8:30 AM.

**Tuesday, Feb. 9, 2010: McAlpine Creek Greenway**

1/2 Day (Easy) • Contact: Ron Clark [waxwing@bellsouth.com]

We will explore the various habitats of the oldest greenway in the county looking for wintering waterfowl and sparrows. Meet at 8:30 AM in the parking lot on Monroe Rd.

**Thursday, Feb. 11, 2010: Nation’s Ford Greenway**

1/2 Day (Easy) • Contact: Dave Lovett [birdsalot@webtv.net]

This greenway will eventually connect to the Anne Springs Greenway. It is sandwiched between the rear side of Springfield Golf Course and Sugar Creek. We will walk it about a mile, then retrace our steps. Expect the usual winter residents. I have seen winter wren and wild turkey here in the past.

The entrance to this greenway, in Ft Mill SC, is located directly behind Ft Mill High School on truck 160 just before the entrance to the ANNE Springs Close Greenway - (field Trial Entrance).

Meet at 8:30 in the parking lot of the Bloom’s Food Store on Highway 21. Take a left at the Carowinds exit. The Bloom’s is on the left a couple of miles down near the intersection with truck Highway 21. Lunch will be at Fish Fare after for those interested.

**Saturday, Feb. 13, 2010: Cowan’s Ford Refuge**

1/2 Day (Moderate) • Contact: John Bonestall [jmcblake@aol.com]

This county property, which has recently been expanded, always has nice birds. A Sedge Wren was located on this property during this year’s Lake Norman CBC. John Bonestall will take us through it since it is accessible by permit only. Meet at 8:30 AM at the observation stand.

**Saturday, Feb. 20, 2010: Pee Dee NWR**

1/2 Day (Moderate) • Contact: Ron Clark [waxwing@bellsouth.net]

We will be able to go into the low grounds to check out the ducks. Meet at 6:30, just behind the MacDonald’s in the Windsor Square Shopping Center at the intersection of Independence and Sam Newell. Bring a lunch, snacks and water.

**Sunday, Feb. 21, 2010: Sherman Branch Nature Preserve (Woodcocks)**

Evening • Contact: Taylor Piephoff [zachary.piephoff@mecklenburgcountync.gov]

Taylor Piephoff will take us looking for woodcocks. Be prepared for a short walk on a well-maintained trail through the woods to get to the site. Bring a flashlight as it will be dark when we walk back to the cars.

Meet at 5:30 PM at Sherman Branch Park parking area off Rocky River Road. From I-485 take the Hwy. 51 Exit (Mint Hill) and go east to the stoplight at the “T” intersection at Hwy. 24/27 (Albemarle Road). Turn left and then right at the next light on Rocky River. Pass Camp Stewart Road on the left, then look for the large parking area to the park on the left.

*Detailed directions to meeting spots can be found at meckbirds.org/trips*
Thursday, Feb. 25, 2010: Four-mile Creek Greenway
1/2 Day (Easy) • Contact: Lucy Quintilliano [lucyq@carolina.rr.com]
Join Lucy Quintilliano as we cover the two miles of this very diverse greenway. We’ll meet at 8:30 AM in the parking lot on Johnston Rd. Map

Saturday, Feb. 27, 2010: Ribbon Walk Nature Preserve
1/2 Day (Easy) • Contact: Tom Sanders [tsander1993@msn.com]
Tom Sanders will take us through this mostly wooded preserve, out to Hawk Meadow. This 1/2 day trip will start at 8:30 AM. Meet in the parking area on Hoyt Hinson Rd off Nevins Rd.

Beginning Birder Tips: Red Finches
The identification of these two finches of the *Carpodacus* genus can be extremely difficult. Each species is about the same size and shape, each is colored red with varying degrees of brown streaking, and each is common to feeder areas. What’s more, the ranges of these birds overlap quite a bit, primarily owing to the ubiquitous distribution of the House Finch. Use the chart below to compare and contrast the features of each finch. Visit the Cornell Lab of Ornithology’s Online Bird Guide [www.allaboutbirds.org] to find species accounts that detail the range, habitat, and food preferences of each species.

**House Finch**
Slimmer body with short, stubby bill with curved culmen; longer tail faintly notched. -intensity of red color varies in males from yellow to orange to red; observer should rely on pattern of color rather than hue;

*Male*
-“headband” of red with brown cap and brown cheek patch;
-red chin, upper throat, and breast fades into conspicuously streaked sides;
-brown wings and back, sometimes lightly washed with red, fades into red rump;
-brown tail

*Female*
-lacks the strong facial pattern of Purple Finch;
-dull white underparts have longer, less sharply defined streaks;
-undertail coverts have broad dark streaks

**Purple Finch**
Plumper body with short, conical beak; shorter, deeply notched tail

*Male:*
-deep raspberry color on most of head (including nape, face, and throat) is underlain by darker ear coverts, nape, and malar stripe, making the head appear contrasted at a distance; light stripe over eye; may have peaked crown;
-raspberry carries onto hindneck (unlike Cassin’s and House Finch);
-reddish color of throat and breast diffuses into a variably but usually faintly streaked lower breast and belly;
-extensive red color on back in eastern birds, less red in Pacific birds

*Female*
-strong face pattern; dark auricular patch separates a bold white “eyebrow” and a white moustache;
-underparts show heavy broad streaks;
-back and scapulars are brown and streaked;
-undertail coverts usually white with no streaks
RALEIGH --
North Carolina’s state parks will pay tribute to its winged residents and visitors in 2010 by celebrating the “Year of the Birds,” according to the N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation.

Throughout the year, birds and bird-watching will be the focus of special education programs and activities in the state parks, many of them in partnership with Audubon North Carolina, which works with the state parks system on research and management projects involving bird habitats. The state parks system is also making available a special bandana of some of the signature birds found in the parks.

Whether they are wild turkeys in the mountains, bald eagles in the Piedmont or piping plovers on the coast, birds greatly contribute to the nature experience in state parks. They’re also “indicator species,” reflecting the health of the natural resources and ecosystems on North Carolina’s publicly-held lands.

“Putting this special emphasis on birds in 2010 can give added depth and clarity to our interpretive programs and education efforts,” said Lewis Ledford, state parks director. “They’re a beloved part of the natural resource mosaic in our state parks.”

State parks are regularly involved in annual bird counts, and the parks are among Audubon’s Important Bird Areas, sites for research about the health of bird populations and habitats. Audubon North Carolina, the state parks and the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission were also among partners that are establishing three distinct birding trails in North Carolina in an effort to combine eco-tourism and natural resource protection (http://www.ncbirdingtrail.org/).

“Birds and state parks share some of the most important habitats in our state,” said Chris Canfield, executive director of Audubon North Carolina. “They also share the distinction of providing a pathway for people to connect with nature. I’m excited by this focus for 2010 and hope all North Carolinians take advantage of it.”

In addition to preparing interpretive programs, state park rangers and natural resource biologists are actively involved in projects to protect and restore habitats for some of our rare and threatened birds, such as the red-cockaded woodpecker and colonial nesting shorebirds. Park rangers and biologists also participate in multi-year bird tagging projects.

State park educational programs hope to appeal to North Carolina’s bird enthusiasts, as well as inspire new bird-watching families. A 2009 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service report estimated one of every five Americans is a “bird-watcher,” defined as someone who took a trip of at least one mile for the primary purpose of observing birds, or someone who closely observed and tried to identify birds around their home. These enthusiasts contributed $36 billion to the national economy in 2006, according to the report.

EARTH HOUR: March 27th

For more information: https://www.myearthhour.org
Genus. It is smaller than any other member of its kind, growing to ten inches in length, with a ten-inch wingspan, bordered by white outer tail feathers. At six inches in length, with a ten-inch wingspan, it is smaller than any other member of its kind. Its overall appearance is quite drab and sparrow-like, pale brown in color, with a black central triangle on the nape (or collar) is a rich chestnut. Females are quite drab and sparrow-like, pale brown overall, and easily concealed in prairie grasses. In flight, both genders show a distinctive tail pattern, with a black central triangle bordered by white outer tail feathers. At six inches in length, with a ten-inch wingspan, it is smaller than any other member of its kind.

**Appearance:** The breeding male Chestnut-collared Longspur can be mistaken for no other bird: the breast and belly are entirely black, and the face is buffy yellow with a pale throat, white eye-line and black crown. The nape (or collar) is a rich chestnut. Females are quite drab and sparrow-like, pale brown overall, and easily concealed in prairie grasses. In flight, both genders show a distinctive tail pattern, with a black central triangle bordered by white outer tail feathers. At six inches in length, with a ten-inch wingspan, it is smaller than any other member of its kind.

**Range & Distribution:** The Chestnut-collared Longspur nests on the Great Plains of the United States and the Canadian Prairie Provinces, from southern Alberta and Manitoba to northeastern Colorado and northern Nebraska. According to North American Breeding Bird Survey data, the densest populations currently occur in southern Alberta and the central Dakotas. The wintering area is in the south central and southwestern U.S. and Mexico, from northern Arizona, central New Mexico and Kansas, south to central Mexico, with some wintering birds present in southern California.

**Habitat:** Historically, this species thrived in areas commonly grazed by wild herds of American Bison. Bison herds are, of course, no longer present, but the Chestnut-collared Longspur continues to find suitable nesting areas. Today, it favors short grass and mixed-grass habitats that have either been heavily grazed by livestock, or recently burned. It avoids grasslands with a dense litter layer or excessive shrubbery (although taller weeds or scattered shrubs can act as useful song perches). While it will nest in mowed areas such as pastures or airfields, it prefers native grasslands and is most abundant in natural landscapes. In the winter, it can be found in a variety of grasslands where vegetation is relatively short (less than half a meter tall). It is an adaptable bird, and wintering flocks can also be found in areas such as fallow fields or mowed cropland.

**Feeding:** Longspurs forage at ground level in search of seeds, crickets, grasshoppers, spiders, and a variety of insects. It is also an occasional ‘flycatcher’, catching flushed insects on the wing, usually in short, quick flights. The majority of the diet of young Chestnut-collared Longspurs is invertebrates, more so than in most other grassland species. Wintering flocks often feed on grains such as wheat, and on the seeds of various native plants.

**Reproduction:** In spring, most males arrive on the breeding grounds up to two weeks before the females, and quickly switch from flocking behavior, to territorial behavior. By the time the females arrive, males are establishing territories and engaging in song, whether from a prominent perch or via aerial song displays. The male displays by flying into the air, circling and fluttering, then singing in descent with tail spread wide; he will often repeat this performance several times without landing. Once paired, the nesting process begins. A grassy nest is built directly on the ground, concealed beneath a clump of grass (and often beside a stone or pat of cattle dung). The female will lay 3-5 eggs, which can be of a variety of pale hues, speckled in brown, red, or lavender. She incubates her clutch for about 12 days. At hatching, the chicks are helpless and only partially covered in gray down, but grow quickly. They are fed by both parents, and wander from the nest in as few as ten days, before they are even capable of flight. Once her chicks are fledged, the female will often set about building a new nest for a second brood, leaving the male to tend to the young. Breeding males often return to former breeding territories year after year, while females have less site fidelity.

**Migration:** Following the breeding season, flocks begin to form – groups of juveniles come together first, then adults. By late September, flocks of Chestnut-collared Longspurs move south to winter on the dry grasslands, deserts, and plateaus of the south central and southwestern United States, and north-central Mexico. Northbound spring migration begins in March. Males typically depart the wintering grounds earlier than females. This species is known to wander occasionally, with rare records documented from as far away as New England.

**Population Status & Trends:** This species was formerly abundant, but as North America’s native prairies have been converted to agriculture, the Chestnut-collared Longspur has declined. BBS results indicate that the species has been in overall decline since 1966, but data should be viewed with some caution, as the nesting areas are often not well covered and the sample sizes are small. Historical accounts indicate that as recently as the late 1800s, the Chestnut-
Continued from page 5

**Chestnut-collared Longspurs**

The Chestnut-collared Longspur was abundant in many locations where it is no longer found, such as Kansas, Nebraska, and Minnesota. It appears that longspurs are also disappearing from parts of their wintering range. Christmas Bird Count data indicate a significant decline in the last 40 years.

**Conservation Issues & Efforts:** Loss of native prairie due to development and conversion to agricultural use has caused population declines in this species. Not only do longspurs depend on native prairie grasslands when nesting, but they seem to also prefer it in migration. There is evidence that some insecticides used to control crop pests reduce hatching success significantly. While Chestnut-collared Longspurs are parasitized by Brown-headed Cowbirds, the two species have evolved together, and parasitism does not have a major effect on breeding success.

Preservation and maintenance of native prairie grassland is crucial to the conservation of this species. The Chestnut-collared Longspur requires large, non-fragmented areas of shortgrass. It favors grazed areas, and will tolerate a fairly wide variety of grazing practices as long as native shortgrass prairie or mixed-grass pasture is present. Controlled burns benefit this species, as does land management that prevents dense vegetation and a build-up of litter. Continued monitoring of the species’ population trends is also of importance, as it appears to be decreasing in most areas.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) rewards farmers and benefits wildlife through the establishment of environmentally responsible land management techniques. Audubon’s Important Bird Area program is a vital tool for the conservation of Chestnut-collared Longspurs as well as other species. Learn how to get involved in the Important Bird Areas program.


Continued from page 1

**GBBC Photo Contest**

All images must be in .jpg format and have been taken during the Great Backyard Bird Count, though photos may be submitted until March 1. Please submit images in as high a resolution as possible.

You must agree to the terms of use. In the “Note” section, please tell us any interesting information about where/how you took the image (optional). You will be asked for your name, address, phone, and email.

Three judges each from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the National Audubon Society will review all the entries. Winners in each category will be notified by email and prizes awarded. All winners and finalists will be posted on the GBBC web site.

Photos are evaluated based on both technical skill and artistic ability. Winning photos are those that show the photographer’s skill in composing an image and using a camera. Images will be judged in six categories: Overall; Bird in its habitat; Behavior; Group shot (2 or more birds); Composition; and People enjoying birds

When taking photos, use your imagination!

**Great Backyard Bird Count**

18,528 checklists, as compared to the previous high of 38,977 birds on 4,069 checklists in 2005. Failure of seed crops farther north caused the siskins to move south to find their favorite food.

On the www.birdcount.org website, participants can explore real-time maps and charts that show what others are reporting during the count. The site has tips to help identify birds and special materials for educators. Participants may also enter the GBBC photo contest by uploading images taken during the count. Many images will be featured in the GBBC website’s photo gallery. All participants are entered in a drawing for prizes that include bird feeders, binoculars, books, CDs, and many other great birding products.

For more information about the GBBC, visit the website at www.birdcount.org. Or contact the Cornell Lab of Ornithology at (800) 843-2473 or (outside the U.S., call (607) 254-2473) or gbbc@cornell.edu, or Audubon at citizenscience@audubon.org or 202-861-2242 ext 3050.

The Great Backyard Bird Count is made possible, in part, by generous support from Wild Birds Unlimited.
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.

If you are not aware of it, the Starbucks at Cotswold Shopping Center provides coffee for our monthly meetings. So the next time you in the neighborhood and need a cup of joe, stop in and thank them for us.

Book Nook

‘Songbird Journeys’ follows the perilous flight and fates of migratory birds

By Franklin Crawford


Chu, a science writer at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, has authored a remarkable as well as alarming account of biannual songbird migrations. Chu’s lucid work educates, entertains and inspires and will appeal to the backyard bird watcher, ornithologist or the lover of bird song for its own sake.

“Songbird Journeys” is far more than just a charming book about pretty birds -- it is a wide-eyed bit of research, and a sobering theme runs throughout it. Songbird populations are declining each season largely due to the activities of the very bipeds who marvel at their melodies: people.

Biologist Rachel Carson’s controversial “Silent Spring” alerted the public to the impact of such pesticides as DDT on wildlife in 1962; since then, numerous other killers of migratory birds have been documented, from habitat destruction and domestic cats to collisions with windows and communications towers. Some experts estimate that the volume of migration over the Gulf of Mexico fell by 50 percent in just two decades between the 1960s and 1980s, and the numbers of many songbird species continue to dwindle.

“This realization has mobilized international efforts to save the places on which migratory birds and other wildlife depend,” Chu writes in her introduction. “It may be that the remarkable amount of knowledge we have gained about songbirds has come just in time to save them.”

The book explains without mea culpas why humans were in the dark for so long about songbird migrations. One simple reason is that many migratory songbirds mostly wing it at night, covering astonishing distances on their sojourns. For instance: Chu invites us to consider blackpoll warblers that travel from Alaska to the Atlantic Ocean, “then embark on a nonstop ocean crossing of some 2,200 miles to South America.” The warbler travels so efficiently during its 36-hour flight south, Chu writes, “that researchers calculate it would log some 720,000 miles to the gallon if it burned gasoline instead of its own fat.”

Songbirds are hardwired with evolutionary adaptations that employ sidereal navigation, polarized light and the Earth’s magnetic field. Given the head start they’ve had, it’s not surprising that humans have only recently caught onto the nocturnal peregrinations of their fine-feathered friends.

All this Chu describes in orderly prose that takes flight with its subject without losing sight of her goal, and when readers reach the end of their journey, they are rewarded with appendices that direct them to songbird migration hotspots, citizen-science projects, resources and, of course, returned to Chu’s home at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

Weird Bird

by Shel Silverstein

Birds are flyin’ south for winter.
Here’s the Weird-Bird headin’ north,
Wings a-flappin’, beak a-chatterin’,
Cold head bobbin’ back ‘n’ forth.
He says, “It’s not that I like ice
Or freezin’ winds and snowy ground.
It’s just sometimes it’s kind of nice
To be the only bird in town.”

MAS Board

Rob Bierregaard - President
rbierreg@uncc.edu

Jack Meckler - Vice President
jmmeckler@carolina.rr.com

Jeff Lemon - Secretary
Jeff_Lemons@hotmail.com

Jill Palmer - Treasurer
jpalmer53@earthlink.net

Ron Clark - Field Trips
waxwing@bellsouth.net

Tom Sanders - Conservation
tsanders1993@msn.com

Carol Ann Tomko - Conservation
catomko@earthlink.net

John Buckman - Membership
linbuckman@aol.com

Dennis Lankford - Membership
harecubed2@carolina.rr.com

Jill Shoemaker - Publicity
shoe4now@bellsouth.com

Lucy Quintilliano - Education
lucyq@carolina.rr.com

Chris Hanna - Hospitality
chrithanna@aol.com

Judy Walker - Newsletter
birdwalker@mac.com