Food, Friends & Fotos

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 like ‘Brag & Tell’. It doesn’t matter, bring your pictures in print or on CD to share with everyone. If your a budding digital video producer, bring those as well. We’ll figure out how to project them. 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 POTLUCK dinner which means we meet at 6:30 PM and you can bring your leftovers from your New Year’s bashes. Please also bring a place setting (plate, utensiles, cup/mug) 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 Fellowship Hall at 6:30 PM for Dinner (the program will start around 7:30 PM) on Thursday, January 6, 2011 for food, fun & fellowship.

Silent Auction

with this term, on a ‘big day’ one tries to record as many species as possible in a 24-hour period in a specified area (county, state, wildlife refuge, etc.). It is possible to see 110+ species in the county if the birding gods are smiling on you that day.

The pace will be up to the winner. A serious big day can be a break neck pace encompassing many miles and many hours, snacking in the car, with few if any breaks. Or, you might opt for a more leisurely pace, actually taking time to see (not just hear) birds before you count them and taking a break now and then. It will be up to you if you have the winning bid. Tom and Ron will work with the winner to select a date that works, presumably in the spring.

Bidding for this package will start at $50. Since two people can go, you might want to pool your funds with another member to have a better chance of winning. If you’re interested, bring a fistful of cash or your checkbook, or you can send a check to our PO box if you win. Remember, the funds will go to pay for Audubon Adventure kits for local teachers and your donation is tax deductible.”
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!!

Saturday, January 1st: Pee Dee National Wildlife Count
Full Day • Contact: Judy Walker [birdwalker@mac.com]

The Pee Dee Christmas Count is a great way to start a of year birding. It produces surprises almost every year. One year it was turkey tracks in the snow and lots of sparrows. Another sight to behold is seeing the ducks take off in the morning or watching them come back in at dusk. Because of the wide variety of habitat and its central location we usually have a pretty good list of birds including Bald Eagles, Tundra Swans, and lots and lots of sparrows and ducks.

If you want to carpool, meet at the McDonalds at Windsor Square Shopping Center at 5:45 AM [on Independence]. Otherwise meet at the Pee Dee Maintenance Building [main entrance off Rt. 52] at 7 AM. Lunch will be provided but you will want to wear lots of layers and bring snack foods and something hot to drink while you are out in the field.

Saturday, January 8th: Cowan’s Ford Wildlife Refuge
1/2 Day (Moderate) • Contact: Ron Clark [waxwing@bellsouth.net]

We’ll meet at 8:30 AM at the viewing stand, and walk the observation field and the woods to Duck Cove. Take I-85 north to Sunset Rd (Exit 16-B). Follow to Beatties Ford Rd and take a right. Go about seven miles and take a left on Neck Rd, which angles off. Follow it to a “T” intersection. Take the gravel road going left and follow to the end.

Thursday, January 13th: Four-mile Creek Greenway
1/2 Day (Easy*) • Contact: Lucy Quintilliano [lucyq@carolina.rr.com]

Meet at the Johnston Road parking lot at 8:30 AM. We’ll car pool to the other end, and walk back on this two-mile greenway, which covers a variety of habitats. From I-485, take Johnston Road toward town. Go through one light. The parking lot will be on the right, immediately past the creek.

January 15th & 16th: Huntington Beach State Park (South Carolina)
Weekend Trip • Contact: Ron Clark [waxwing@bellsouth.net]

Our winter excursion to Huntington Beach State Park is an annual favorite offering some different bird species than our fall trip. Waterfowl - 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 to dress warmly as the winds off the ocean can be chilling and bring a lunch for a midday break.

For those staying the weekend, Saturday evening we gather at a local restaurant for dinner to decide on where we will bird Sunday morning for half a day before heading home. Local hotels with off-season rates include: Litchfield In [843-237-4211], Days Inn Surfside [843-238-4444], Brookwood Inn [843-651-2550].

Detailed directions to meeting spots can be found at meckbirds.org/trips

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.
Field Trips

Saturday, January 22nd: Coddle Creek/Moss Creek Greenway
1/2 Day (Easy) • Contact: Judy Walker [birdwalker@mac.com]
This will be a repeat of the December trip hopefully with more ducks. We’ll meet at Panera’s at Concord Mills at 9:00 AM and then carpool to the reservior and greenway.

Saturday, January 29th: Evergreen Nature Preserve
1/2 Day (Moderate) • Contact: Larry and Louise Barden [louise@lbarden.com]
The Bardens will lead us through their personal back yard as we search the pre-serve for residents and migrants. We’ll meet at 8:30 AM in the bus lot at Wintergreen Elem. School. Go out Central Ave and take a right on Rosehaven Dr. Follow it to the end and take a right on Winterfield Pl. The school is on your left.

If It Looks Like a Duck....

By Melissa Mayntz, About.com Guide

Ducks can be one of the most difficult types of waterfowl to identify. Not only are there many different types of ducks, but they often form mixed flocks and similar species can be seen in close proximity. Hens in particular can be challenging to distinguish, and many ducks’ propensity to hybridize further creates identification challenges. These duck identification tips can help you learn to sort out which duck is which so you can always be confident that your birding skills are just ducky.

Identifying Ducks by Sight

Many duck species can be easy to identify visually if you know what to look for. Because these are larger birds that can be seen on open water, it is often easy to pick out different field marks for a proper identification. When watching ducks, look for these characteristics to identify the species.

* Size: How large is the duck? How do the head and neck look in proportion to the body? What posture is typical for the duck at rest? How high is it floating in the water?
* Head: What markings are visible on the head? Is there a brow or eye line, cheek patches or a head crest? Is the head round, sloped or elongated?
* Bill: What is the size and color of the bill? How big is the nail, and is it a different color? What is the bill’s thickness and slope? Are both mandibles the same color?
* Neck: What is the neck length? Does it show any unique rings or coloration? How does the bird hold it at rest, when aggressive or when feeding?
* Plumage: What are the most prominent colors on the back, rump, neck, breast and flanks? Is there any iridescence or bold color patches? Is the plumage streaked, spotted or marked in any way?
* Legs: What color are the legs, and how long are they? Where are they positioned on the bird’s body? Does the bird walk well on land?
* Tail: How long is the tail? It is held stiffly upright or slack behind the body?

While male ducks — drakes — can be easy to identify by sight alone, hens can be more challenging and it may be necessary to consider other characteristics as well for positive identification.

Other Ways to Identify Ducks

In addition to field markings and general appearance, there are other ways to identify ducks conclusively.

* Range and Habitat: Where the bird is sighted is a great clue to its identity. While many ducks are widespread geographically, they tend to prefer the same types of habitat wherever they are found. Knowing water depth, vegetation and whether it is fresh or salt water can help you discover a particular duck’s identity.

* Feeding Behavior: Ducks feed in different ways. Dabbling ducks “tip up” to feed on vegetation, while diving ducks will disappear below the surface of the water to find their next bite. Note the bird’s feeding behavior as well as what it eats and whether or not it forages on land to help you identify the species.

* Sounds: Not all ducks quack, and not all quacks sound the same. Learning to bird by ear can help you distinguish different ducks’ identities. Pay attention to nonverbal sounds as well, particularly any noise the birds’ wings may make in flight.

* Flocks: Many ducks tend to be quite loyal toward their own kind, so if you’re stumped on a mystery duck compare it to others in the flock, particularly those it is closest to and seems

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December 8, 2010, Wilmington, NC – One of the last undeveloped barrier islands in North Carolina is one step closer to permanent protection. Thanks to a generous donation from Fred and Alice Stanback, Audubon North Carolina has purchased a 35.7-acre tract on Lea Island, an undisturbed barrier island in Pender County. The nonprofit organization purchased the property in a bargain sale from James Johnson of Coastland Corporation. The island is one of the most important havens for shorebirds and waterbirds in North Carolina, as well as an important nesting site for federally threatened loggerhead sea turtles. Audubon North Carolina will manage the tract as part of its coastal sanctuary system, which comprises 19 other island and inlet bird habitats along the coast.

“Lea Island is one of the few undisturbed barrier islands left in North Carolina,” said Walker Golder, Acting Co-Executive Director of Audubon North Carolina. “This purchase brings us much closer to permanently protecting this increasingly rare habitat type.”

Located between Topsail and Figure Eight Islands, Lea Island is only accessible by boat and has never been affected by the intensive development found on many of North Carolina’s barrier islands. The island has escaped the impacts of off-road vehicles and hardened structures, and its beaches are not replenished with dredged sand. It has the natural features and plant communities characteristic of an untrammeled barrier island, as well as the wildlife.

During the spring and summer, the island is a haven for nesting shorebirds such as Piping Plover, Wilson’s Plover, and American Oystercatcher, and other nesting birds including Black Skimmer and Least Tern. The island represents the southernmost documented breeding site for Piping Plover, a federally threatened bird named for its melodic call. Clapper Rails nest in great numbers in the marshes bordering the island. Nelson’s Sparrow and Seaside Sparrow are abundant during the fall and winter and the island is recognized as a globally significant site for Saltmarsh Sparrow.

At other times of year, numerous migrating and wintering shorebirds flock here, numbering a thousand or more during the peak of migration. Topsail Inlet on the northern part of the island provides critical habitat for migrating and wintering Piping Plovers; as many as 26 birds have been observed during migration.

In 2004, the National Audubon Society identified Lea Island as a critical component of the Lea-Hutaff Important Bird Area. The 5,461-acre Important Bird Area includes the upland sandy beach of Lea and Hutaff Islands (now joined by the closure of Old Topsail Inlet) as well as an extensive marsh and tidal creek complex. The newly-protected tract is located in the middle of the upland beach portion of the island and spans the marsh to the ocean. The tract is important for nesting shorebirds and terns, migrating and wintering shorebirds, nesting sea turtles, and seabeach amaranth (a federally-threatened plant).

The island is a popular destination for beachgoers who enjoy shelling, walking, swimming, fishing, surfing, and wildlife viewing. Audubon biologists protect bird and sea turtle nesting sites during the spring and summer by roping off nesting areas and talking to island visitors about how people and dogs can inadvertently disturb nesting birds and sea turtles.

Lea Island is included in a new Audubon Christmas Bird Count (CBC) that will take place on December 19, 2010. The Holly Shelter & Lea-Hutaff Island CBC will become part of the longest running citizen science survey in the world.

The conservation of Lea Island is part of a long-standing partnership between Audubon North Carolina, the North Carolina Coastal Land Trust, and the State of North Carolina, which established the Lea Island State Natural Area in 2003. The acquisition of this 35.7-acre tract nearly doubles the acreage already protected through this partnership.
Big Day Birding in Mecklenburg County
by Ron Clark

Tom Sanders and I have finished our first year of Big Days in Mecklenburg County. We actually started last December and included Cabarrus County. I did one solo in November 2009, ending with 61 species. Tom expressed interest in coming along. So, I told him that if we didn’t get more than I got alone, he was just “dead weight”! (Of course, he’s anything but.) We ended with a few more species, so he “passed”. It’s much easier with two sets of eyes and ears. Plus, I really get tired of having conversations with myself. No, I don’t. Yes, I do!

On our day in December, we got reprimanded at the school at Moss Creek. I parked where it looked out of the way. We had only gone 200 feet down the trail when some fellow was yelling to us that we were going to be towed. He was nice about it, and told us a better place to park. After that, we decided that Mecklenburg was friendlier, so we scratched Cabarrus. Okay, the truth is that we realized it was too much to get from Coddle Creek and Moss Creek to McDowell Prairie, and all other points. So, in January, we started fresh. We set the first week of each month as our time frame. I drive and Tom keeps the time. So, in January, we started fresh. We set the first week of each month as our time frame. I drive and Tom keeps the time. We have found that if you stand just past the gate a little before sunrise, a woodcock is likely to fly by. It’s quicker in the spring when you can hear them. The gate isn’t opened until around 7:00. In the summer months, we’re there before 5:30. We walk and bird the road up to the power lines, then drive back to Rural Hill. Usually by then the gate is open, so we go to the viewing stand. We only walk to the ponds. We usually go to Duck Cove for prothonotary warbler and others in season. The summer months gave us 16-hour days. (Someone asked me how we stand each other that long!) We grab lunch in late morning before the crowds hit, and eat it on the way to another stop.

Many, sometimes most, of the birds are counted by song or call. We have the songs and many calls down for the most part, but some of the calls are real head-scratchers. Most of the birds have more than one. For example, Carolina wrens have over 20 calls or phrases. Even a hermit thrush has three sounds it makes, besides its song.

After we get a species, we ignore it the rest of the day. That’s the theory anyhow. We still find ourselves looking at birds we have already seen. By the Big Day rules, we both have to recognize the bird by sight or sound for it to count, although 5% can be by one person. So far, we haven’t gone above 5%.

One of our easiest good birds was one month looking for for the Mississippi kites off Providence Rd. We pulled into the school lot. Through the windshield, we watched a crow chase one of the kites out from a tree. I hadn’t even put the truck into Park. That hasn’t happened since. Decisions have to be made on how long to give for finding a species. The kites, along with the ravens at the quarry, are very good birds for the county, but you can’t spend too much time waiting for them to show up. There’s a peregrine falcon in town for the winter, but, with shorter daylight, we don’t have the time to (hopefully) see it.

There’s a lot of ground to cover. After Cowan’s Ford, Rural Hill and other northern county spots, we hit I-77 for the McDowell Prairie area, with one stop on the way. Then over to the Pineville Water Treatment Plant, Six-Mile and Four-Mile Greenways. We usually finish up at Evergreen. There are many short stops along the way, depending on the season and what we need. The Pineville WTP, which we go to with permission,
always has something new. In November we added 7 species. It always has mallards, usually 75 or so, but, in December, there were only 3. They get fed by one of the employees, so I don’t know where they all went. This is the least sandpiper spot for most of the year. There have been a few other shorebirds there also.

One humorous sighting was when a hornet’s nest morphed into a barred owl. We finished the December day at Evergreen, getting there just before dusk. As we entered the clearing, an owl flew along the right edge. From the overall color in the three seconds that we saw it, it looked like a great horned owl, having more of a golden tone rather than gray. Not being positive, we had to decide whether to count it as either owl. Some minutes later, we saw something in a tree along the edge. After a binoculars look, it was called an old hornet’s nest. We birded for a few more minutes, having a singing fox sparrow come closer. Tom did a couple of barred owl calls. Then, lo and behold, there was one sitting in a tree, watching us, in the area of the nest. Then it was noticed that there was no longer a hornet’s nest. So, it seems that the barred owl ate the nest, and chased off the great horned owl that we thought we had earlier! That’s our story and we’re sticking with it.

After 12 “grueling” months of birding the county, here are some of the stats. We ended with a total of 158 species for the year. There were 32 species that we found every month. These were the common birds, of course, but we had least sandpiper for 10 of the months. They were absent June and July when they were up north doing their thing. American kestrel was another that we missed for only two months. We had 24 warblers total, but should have had more. Ones we missed were golden-winged, blue-winged, bay-breasted, blackpoll, worm-eating and ovenbird. A couple of these are tough to find here, but all are possible. Our duck total was 11 and vireo was 5. Broad-winged hawk and common nighthawk (scarce this year) were also misses.

It took a few months to get our rhythm, but it’s now a well-oiled machine! Okay, there’s still some sand in the gears and sawdust in the transmission, but we’re getting there. We just have a good time. Now that the year is finished, so are our Big Days. Woops, my nose just got longer! We have to do it again to compare the numbers with this year. Plus, we have the blessings of Tammy and Anne in this venture. Well, okay, we have their tolerance! (Actually, they’ve been very supportive, although it took a few months to get our rhythm, but it’s now a well-oiled machine! Okay, there’s still some sand in the gears and sawdust in the transmission, but we’re getting there. We just have a good time.)

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