With the beginning of a new year, we often find ourselves thinking about change and how we might reinvent ourselves. Butterflies and moths are masters at change, emerging from their cocoons completely different from when they originally spun their snug nests. Anne-Marie Howell, a Master Gardener from Union County will not only explain how these tiny, delicate insects accomplish this complete metamorphosis but also tell us how we can transform our backyards into a magical place where these creatures can thrive. Her ¾ acre backyard is a certified Wild Life Habitat that is well on its way to becoming a registered Monarch Way Station. With host plants for more than six varieties of butterflies and a myriad of nectar plants, her backyard is a haven for butterflies and moths.

So start your New Year by flitting over to the Marion Diehl Senior Center (2225 Tyvola Road.) for a marvelous program which will start at 7:30 PM. Light refreshments will be available at 7:15 PM. It will change how you look at your backyard!

Thursday, January 3, 2013
7:30 PM • Tyvola Senior Center
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, Dec. 29th - Pee Dee CBC.**
Contact: Judy Walker (birdwalker@me.com)

There is nothing quite like knowing you are the only one wandering the paths of a wildlife refuge. That’s what it is like at the Pee Dee Count. We have the refuge to ourselves. Habitats include open fields, mixed woodlands and small lakes and ponds. Red-headed woodpeckers and ducks abound and if we are lucky a few Tundra Swans might grace the landscape. We will be out in the field all day so remember to dress warmly as things can get pretty cold out in the fields. There will be a hot lunch to warm our inners and energize us for an afternoon of more birding.

For those wishing to car pool, we will meet at 5:45 AM at the McDonald’s at the Windsor Square Shopping Center on Independence.

**Saturday, January 5th - Kirk Wetland/Mallard Creek Grnwy.**
1/2 day • Easy • Contact: Judy Walker (birdwalker@me.com)

The wetland is loaded with sparrows to test your identification skills. The greenway has additional variety to provide some interesting birds. We will meet at 8:30 AM in parking lot of the Kirk Farm soccer field/greenway entrance. Depending on what direction you are coming from you may need to pass the entrance and do a u-turn since the road has a divider.

**Wednesday, January 9th - Huntingtowne Farms Grnwy.**
1/2 day • Easy • Contact: Dave Lovett (birdsalot@webtv.net)

We'll start at 8:30 in the parking lot at the end of Huntingtowne Farms Road. This a flat two-mile walk (total) along Little Sugar Creek.

**Saturday, January 12th - Latta Prairie/Nature Preserve.**
1/2 day • Moderate • Contact: Ron Clark (waxwing@bellsouth.net)

We'll start out with a walk to the prairie, looking for field and woods birds. This is about 2 miles total, on gravel and dirt road. Then we'll check the lake at a couple of spots in the preserve for winter waterfowl. Meet at 8:30 in the parking lot just inside the gate of the preserve.

**Saturday/Sunday, Jan. 18-20 - Huntington Beach State Park.**
Weekend • Moderate • Contact: Judy Walker (birdwalker@me.com)

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], Comfort Inn Surfside [843-233-8585], Days Inn Surfside [843-238-4444], Brookwood Inn [843-651-2550].
Saturday, January 19th - Beginner’s Bird Walk.
1/2 day • Easy • Contact: Sally Miller (sallyart@bellsouth.net)
This is a monthly walk where Sally Miller goes over the basics of birding, from binocular usage to tips on bird identification. If you don’t have binoculars, she can provide them for you. Meet her at 8:30 AM in the parking lot of McAlpine Creek Park.

Saturday, January 26th - Six-Mile Creek Greenway.
1/2 day • Easy • Contact: Dave Lovett (birdsalot@webtv.net)
This southern Mecklenburg greenway winds through woods, brush and creekside. It’s 2 1/2 miles total, all flat. We’ll meet at 8:30 in the parking lot on Marvin Road.

Wednesday, January 30th - Four-Mile Creek Greenway.
1/2 day • Easy • Contact: Ron Clark (waxwing@bellsouth.net)
This two-mile walk covers a variety of habitats; pine and deciduous woods, marsh and fields. We’ll meet at 8:30 in the parking lot on Johnston Road.

Saturday, Feb. 2nd - McDowell Prairie/Copperhead Island.
1/2 day • Moderate • Contact: Ron Clark (waxwing@bellsouth.net)
The prairie is a 2-mile walk through fields and wood edges. Sturdy shoes are suggested. Then we’ll go to nearby Copperhead Island to scope Lake Wylie for waterfowl. We’ll meet at 8:30 in a new spot. Turn right on Shopton Road off Hwy 49. In 0.7 miles, turn left on Four Horse Road. Follow it about 3/4 mile to the green gate on the right.

Wednesday, February 6th - McMullen Creek Greenway.
1/2 day • Easy • Contact: Dave Lovett (birdsalot@webtv.net)
This section of greenway is on the opposite end of Four-Mile Creek. It goes through woods, marsh and creekside. The parking lot is on Hwy. 51 near Johnston Rd. We’ll meet there at 8:30 AM.

Sunday, February 10th - Sherman Branch Woodcock Walk.
Evening • Contact: Taylor Piephoff (piephofft@aol.com)
Sleep in this morning as this one starts at 5:00 P.M. The birds are almost guaranteed, sometimes landing as close as 30-40 feet. The parking lot for the nature preserve is off Rocky River Road. Bring a flashlight for the walk back to the cars. Let Taylor know by the February 6th if you will be attending.

Saturday, February 16th - Beginner’s Bird Walk.
1/2 day • Easy • Contact: Sally Miller (sallyart@bellsouth.net)
This is a monthly walk where Sally Miller goes over the basics of birding, from binocular usage to tips on bird identification. If you don’t have binoculars, she can provide them for you. Meet her at 8:30 AM in the parking lot of McAlpine Creek Park.

Saturday, February 23rd - Anne Springs Greenway.
1/2 day • Moderate • Contact: Dave Lovett (birdsalot@webtv.net)
We’ll bird a different section of this greenway, known as the field trial area. It has woods, two ponds and fields for a good variety of birds. There is a $3 fee. We’ll meet at the Food lion on Hwy 21. Take a left off I-77 onto Carowinds Blvd. It’s about one mile on the left.
Pollution, habitat destruction and now global warming are shoving more and more birds into the ecological red zone. National Audubon’s 10 Under 10,000 spotlights ten bird species whose populations have fallen below 10,000. Their plight underscores the urgency of our conservation efforts.

List of 10 species under 10,000

• **Piping Plover.** An endearing shorebird, with an estimated 8,000 individuals remaining in the wild. The majority of Piping Plovers winter in the Bahamas, a fact that scientists did not discover until 2011.

• **California Condor.** Perhaps America’s most endangered bird, the majestic condor was extinct in the wild by 1987. Following years of intensive efforts by Audubon and other groups, the wild population is climbing slowly, and is now 232 birds.

• **Florida Scrub-jay.** At last count, fewer than 8,000 of these habitat specialists are thought to survive among remnant scrub oak forests in central Florida.

• **Black Oystercatcher.** This showy all-black Pacific shorebird has a bright red bill and red eyes, making them easy to spot. Population estimates hover around 8,900.

• **Kirtland’s Warbler.** An adult Kirtland’s Warbler weighs less than half an ounce. Numbers fell as low as 200 birds in the late 1980s, but conservation efforts have helped the little songbird rebound to a still-precarious 2,800.

• **Short-tailed Albatross.** Alaska’s most endangered bird. With a wingspan of over 7 feet, it is also the largest seabird in the North Pacific. Relentless hunting for feathers took a massive toll. As few as 50 birds remained in the wild before conservationists intervened. The population has climbed slowly, to roughly 2400 birds today.

• **Gunnison Sage-Grouse.** A dark and turkey-like grouse. Like the Greater Sage Grouse, males engage in memorably comedic courtship displays. Habitat loss has driven these birds to 2,000 to 5,000 individuals in Western Colorado.

• **Everglade Snail Kite.** This small hawk feeds almost exclusively on apple snails in South Florida’s freshwater wetlands. Urban sprawl has overtaken much of the bird’s historic range. Its current population is unknown.

• **Whooping Crane.** America’s tallest bird. Fewer than 500 of these magnificent birds survive in the wild. Hunting drove the Whooping Cranes to the brink – in 1941 only 15 birds remained.

• **Akeke’e.** Golden with a blue bill, this finch-like bird lives only on the island of Kaua‘i. The introduction of invasive diseases, plants and predators have driven this bird’s numbers to below 4,000.

For more information about these birds go to birds.audubon.org/10-under-10000
Crowd Sourcing Birds!!

Now that winter has definitely arrived, the behavior of birds and birders has changed. Have you ever noticed while out birding one minute everything is quiet. Then you hear a chickadee and perhaps a titmouse. Then next thing you know you are surrounded by a whirlwind of activity, with a variety of species moving around in the trees, shrubs and on the ground. Then as quickly as they came they disappear. This is what experienced birders hope for when they are out and about, because often these wandering flocks will include more unusual birds like creepers and blue-headed vireos. These groups of birds are referred to as mixed-species flocks and have puzzled ornithologists for many years since many of the birds that participate in these flocks are very territorial during the breeding season.

Below are some theories on why birds form these mixed-flocks. For more scholarly information on the topic just do a Google search for - mixed bird flocks - and you will be surprised at what you will find.

**Mixed-Species Flocking**

It is not uncommon to find birds of several species flocking together. One reason may be that such flocking increases the number of eyes and ears available to detect predators and may confuse them as many individuals flee at once. Also a mixture of species can take advantage of different abilities. Just as nearsighted zebras with keen hearing associate on African plains with species such as wildebeest and giraffes with keen eyesight, so nearsighted gleaning birds such as Red-eyed Vireos move in groups (on their tropical wintering grounds) with farsighted salliers like Yellow-winged Tanager. The former lose some prey to the latter, but apparently are more than compensated by the latter's early detection of approaching danger. Similarly, it has been shown experimentally that chickadees and titmice are used as sentinels by Downy Woodpeckers foraging in mixed-species flocks.

Next to predator defense, however, the most popular hypothesis to explain the formation of mixed-species flocks is an increase in feeding efficiency. Flocks may function to overwhelm territorial defenses, because moving groups are able to feed in areas from which single individuals would be ejected by the “owner” of the territory. Having more individuals searching for food also increases the likelihood that a rich feeding patch will be located. By moving together in a mixed-species flock, birds with the same sorts of diets can avoid areas that have already been searched for food. Individuals in mixed flocks can also learn about new food sources from other species; tits have been observed to visit the site where a woodpecker was pecking at bark and to begin pecking in the same place. Finally, by associating with birds of different species that have somewhat different food preferences and foraging techniques, each individual faces less competition than it would in a similar flock of conspecifics.

If the feeding efficiency hypothesis is correct, then the amount of flocking should be related to the availability of food; when food is superabundant, little can be gained by flocking. A test of this hypothesis was carried out in two Ohio woodlots. One woodlot was left undisturbed; the other was provisioned in early November with an ample supply of sunflower seed and beef suet. Downy Woodpeckers, Tufted Titmice, Carolina Chickadees, Brown creepers, and White-breasted Nuthatches all participated much less frequently in mixed-species flocks in the provisioned woodlot than they did in the control woodlot. This result supports the hypothesis that increased feeding efficiency is a major cause of mixed-species flocking.

Similarly, flocks may occur because one species, in the course of its feeding, flushes prey that can be caught by the others. Such foraging associations are called commensal feeding. In Australian rain forests, Yellow Robins follow Brush Turkeys, pouncing on insects the turkeys stir up as they scratch through the dead leaves of the forest floor. Cattle Egrets “flock” with cattle and tractors for similar reasons.

There are other interesting aspects of mixed-species flocks. For instance some species appear to take the lead in forming the flock – to serve as “nuclear” or “core” species. Such species often have conspicuous plumage or behavior. Titmice in North America (and tits in Europe and Africa) play this role, as do antbirds (which often “flock” with army ants and snap up insects their raiding columns disturb) in tropical America, babblers in tropical Asia, fairy wrens and thornbills (tit-like birds) in Australia, and Gerygone warblers in New Guinea.

Mixed-species flocks in North America are seen primarily in the nonbreeding season. They tend to have a rapid turnover of species when they are just beginning to form in the late summer as migratory species depart or pass through from more northern locations. It is not in the temperate zones, however, that such flocking reaches its highest development. Mixed-species flocks are a dominant feature in tropical moist forests.

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get harder with experience.

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Mixed Flocks

-- so much so that their arrival can quickly transform an almost birdless patch of forest into an area alive with activity and calling. The composition of these tropical flocks and the complex relationships among their members are just beginning to be elucidated. Some of “our” birds join these flocks on the wintering grounds in Central and South America, and provide one reason for everyone interested in birds to make at least one trip to a tropical forest.

Mixed Flocks

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All the Better to See them With!

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 under-neath, 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 of 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 45o). 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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Gulls

Once a gull has reached full adulthood, its plumage alternates between adult winter and breeding adult for the rest of its life. All feather are renewed at least once annually, and plumage cannot be used to estimate age. Twenty-year-old gulls are indistinguishable from five-year-olds.

[This is an excerpt from Jack Connor’s The Complete Birder: A Guide to Better Birding. He goes into detail on how to distinguish between the individual species.]