

THE BULLETIN

Chapel Hill Bird Club

c/o C. W. Cook
418 Sharon Rd.
Chapel Hill, NC 27514



Vol. XXIX, No. 4

April 2000

Monthly Meeting

Monday, April 24, 2000, at 7:30 pm

Program — *Caribbean Pelagics*, presented by **Will Mackin**, graduate student at UNC

Location — **Binkley Baptist Church**, the Lounge. Binkley is on Willow Drive at 15-501 in Chapel Hill, near University Mall.

Caribbean Pelagics

by *Ginger Travis*

Tropical seabirds will be the topic April 24, when Will Mackin, a UNC-CH graduate student, talks about his work mapping the distribution of Caribbean pelagic species. Little is known about many of these birds, and some species are declining in the West Indies. If you've ever been on a pelagic trip off the N.C. coast or have birded in the Caribbean or just want to know more about seabirds, you'll enjoy the meeting. As usual, if you come early (7:15 p.m.), you'll find refreshments.

NOTE: Haven Wiley was scheduled to speak at this meeting about the Orange and Chatham County breeding bird surveys that he has initiated. He had to cancel because a family member is ailing. Despite Haven's absence, we'll still discuss the surveys briefly at our meeting. If you are interested in participating in the Chatham Co. survey, we want to hear from you! See details on Haven's MBBS web site:

<http://www.unc.edu/~rhwiley/mbbs>

Upcoming programs:

May 24 — Scott Hartley on the ecology of Weymouth Woods - Sandhills Nature Preserve, where a population of Red-cockaded Woodpeckers is found (rescheduled from Jan. 24, the night the blizzard began).

Backyard Birding for Beginners

Cynthia Fox will lead this introductory course for newcomers to bird watching on Wed., May 17, 7:00 pm at the Totten Center (NC Botanical Garden). On Sunday morning we'll take to the field for a first hand look and listen. Call Stephen Chandler for more information at 929-7573, or simply mail your \$10 course fee check (made out to New Hope Audubon Society) to Steve at 402 Ray Rd., Chapel Hill, NC 27516.

Spring Bird Counts

It's that time of year again — the local count organizers are looking for fresh recruits. Birders of all ages and skills are welcome — beginners will normally be paired with more experienced observers.

As with the last Chapel Hill Christmas count, Spring count forms are on the CHBC web site:

<http://www.duke.edu/~cwcook/chbc>

If you can't get them from there, give me a call and I'll mail you the form.

The Chapel Hill countdown is at the K&W Cafeteria in University Mall at 5:30 pm on 5/14. We meet in the far back section, usually in the smoking section because it's less crowded.

| | | | |
|-------------|---------|------------------|----------|
| DURHAM | Apr. 30 | Mike Schultz | 490-6761 |
| JORDAN LAKE | May 7 | Carol Williamson | 383-2364 |
| RALEIGH | May 13 | John Connors | 755-0253 |
| CHAPEL HILL | May 14 | Will Cook | 967-5446 |

Breeding Bird Survey for Orange and Chatham

Participants Needed for New Chatham Survey

by *Ginger Travis*

In 1999 birders led by Professor Haven Wiley of UNC-CH inaugurated a multi-year breeding-bird survey for Orange Co. This spring we'll continue the Orange Co. survey and start one in Chatham Co. If you'd like to participate, we'd love to hear from you!

Our survey is based on the methods employed by the Fish and Wildlife Service's long-standing national

Membership Information

Calendar-year (Jan.-Dec.) dues for most individuals and families are \$15; for students, \$10. If you wish to renew for more than one year, multiply the annual dues rate times the number of years. Please send your check (payable to the *Chapel Hill Bird Club*) to club treasurer Fran Hommersand, 304 Spruce Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27514. If you have questions, please call Fran at 967-1745.

Name(s): _____

Address: _____

Telephone: (____) _____ - _____

E-mail _____

roadside survey: a person drives an assigned route and stops every half mile to record all birds seen and heard during a three-minute stop. When the same routes are counted in the same way over a period of years, a picture emerges of population trends. Some of the information nationally about declining species of songbirds has come from the Fish and Wildlife survey; and it has shown that other species seem to have stable populations.

Why should we do a similar survey in Orange and Chatham counties? Haven Wiley noted that we do not really know much about the wildlife, countywide, of Orange and Chatham. And if there is to be a voice for wildlife at the county planning level, we have to have good data. In other words, if we want the county to help protect sensitive habitats for our breeding birds, we have to know what we've got within the governmental boundaries. The southern half of Orange Co. is intensively birded, but not a whole lot is known about the county's birds north of Hillsborough. Chatham County has been birded hard near Jordan Lake and the Orange Co. boundary, but this very large county has tremendous blank spots as far as our knowledge of its breeding birds is concerned. And Chatham is developing very fast. It's crucial to increase our knowledge of breeding birds there.

Want to help? Counting birds on a survey route is fun and doesn't take more than a few hours a year, including preparation time. It does require ID skills, but you needn't be an expert. And a team of two can work together. Our routes are 9.5 miles long. We stop every half mile for three minutes to count; there is a total of 20 stops on a route. A team approach is good because it's helpful to have someone keep time and record the birds you see and hear.

We'll be discussing the breeding bird survey at the Chapel Hill Bird Club meeting on April 24, and we may know by then what the Chatham County routes will be.

If you're interested in learning more about how the survey works, take a look at Haven Wiley's website with a description of the 1999 Orange Co. survey and results: <http://www.unc.edu/~rhwiley/mbbs/>

And if you want to help with the Chatham survey this year, contact Marsha Stephens (942-7205 email: marsha_stephens@unc.edu) or me (942-7746 email: ginger_travis@unc.edu). This is a joint project of the Chapel Hill Bird Club and the New Hope Audubon chapter. We welcome your interest and participation!

1999 Bird Lists

by Will Cook

As promised, here are club members' bird life list totals (as of 12/31/99) for various areas. The ABA Area is North America north of Mexico. The Triangle Area includes all of Chatham, Durham, Orange, and Wake Counties, plus those areas of Falls Lake in Granville County. Here are the results:

World

| | |
|-------------------|------|
| Dan Kaplan | 1494 |
| Pat & Pete Hobson | 1186 |
| Jeff Pippen | 1064 |
| Will Cook | 579 |
| Ken Lundstrom | 377 |
| Bruce Young | 355 |

ABA Area

| | |
|-------------------|-----|
| Dan Kaplan | 702 |
| Ricky Davis | 647 |
| Jeff Pippen | 598 |
| Will Cook | 569 |
| Pat & Pete Hobson | 538 |
| Ken Lundstrom | 358 |
| Bruce Young | 355 |

NC

| | |
|-------------|-----|
| Ricky Davis | 399 |
| Jeff Pippen | 366 |
| Will Cook | 358 |
| Dan Kaplan | 321 |
| Bruce Young | 254 |

Triangle Area

| | |
|-------------|-----|
| Ricky Davis | 284 |
| Will Cook | 256 |
| Jeff Pippen | 241 |
| Bruce Young | 205 |
| Dan Kaplan | 196 |

Chatham

| | |
|-------------|-----|
| Will Cook | 218 |
| Jeff Pippen | 188 |
| Bruce Young | 164 |

Durham

| | |
|-------------|-----|
| Will Cook | 203 |
| Jeff Pippen | 191 |
| Bruce Young | 149 |

Orange

| | |
|-------------|-----|
| Will Cook | 180 |
| Jeff Pippen | 170 |
| Bruce Young | 140 |

Wake

| | |
|-------------|-----|
| Will Cook | 166 |
| Jeff Pippen | 131 |
| Bruce Young | 119 |

If you think that's impressive, here's the story of the late Phoebe Snetsinger, the world's #1 lister...

Phoebe Snetsinger, 68, Dies; Held Record for Bird Sightings

by Douglas Martin, *New York Times*, 12/2/99

Phoebe Snetsinger, who saw and recorded more birds than anybody else, died on Nov. 23 in a van accident on a birding expedition to Madagascar, shortly after viewing an exception-

ally rare Helmet vanga. She was 68 and lived in Webster Groves, Mo., a suburb of St. Louis.

Birding went from a hobby to a passion for Mrs. Snetsinger on the day in 1981 that a doctor told her she had an incurable cancer, with less than a year to live. Rejecting therapy, she took off to Alaska on a scheduled trip, her first long-distance journey simply to see birds.

"She came back and felt good," her husband, David, said. "Things just started snowballing from there."

Mrs. Snetsinger liked to say her avian ardor "began with a death sentence," and her relentless energy reflected that level of urgency as her cancer went into the first of several remissions. Family members and friends could not imagine her without binoculars, floppy hat, sneakers, telescope and other field gear as she scurried around the globe on scores of bird tours, most costing more than \$5,000. An inheritance paid the bills; she supplied the boundless energy. She said she spent more time in the world's jungles, mountains and other wild areas than at home.

There were setbacks, as the cancer, melanoma, recurred every five years or so, only to go into remission again. But her record, as verified by the American Birding Association, was sighting about 8,400 birds, or nearly 85 percent of the species now estimated to exist, more than 2,000 birds ahead of her nearest competitor.

"She was a celebrity in our bunch," said Bret Whitney, a co-founder of Field Guides, a tour operator based in Austin, Tex.

Mrs. Snetsinger was traveling on one of the group's tours when the van overturned. Whitney said she apparently died instantly.

"She gave so much to the birding world and had so much more left to give," said G. Stuart Keith, the birding association's first president. At the highest tier of birding, it was a common joke to differentiate between Phoebe Snetsinger and the phoebe, a genus of flycatchers.

Genera, or large groups of species (as in the genus *Homo sapiens*), were of considerable importance to Mrs. Snetsinger, who kept a separate list of those that have only a single species, known as monotypic genera. Her list of more than 2,000 such genera far surpassed anyone else's, said Whitney, who also works as a research associate at Louisiana State University.

She also kept extensive notes on subspecies, using index cards as a catalog until switching in recent months to a computer from the Remington portable typewriter she had used since college.

Her subspecies notes, in whatever format, are important because many of the birds have now been reclassified as species. When she started, there were 8,500 officially named species, compared with about 10,000 now. A spokeswoman for the American Museum of Natural History said some scientists believed there could eventually be as many as 18,000 named separate bird species.

This means that her life list will almost certainly grow posthumously. "She has birds in escrow," Whitney said.

Mrs. Snetsinger was born in Lake Zurich, Ill., where she attended a one-room elementary school with only two other students. At 11, she met her future husband, then 13, in 4-H clubs.

She graduated from Swarthmore College as a German major, and then taught science at the Baldwin School, a private girls school in Bryn Mawr, Pa. When Snetsinger returned from service in Korea, they both attended graduate school and she earned a master's degree in German literature.

They had four children, all of whom survive. They are Thomas, of Corvallis, Ore.; Penny, of Woodbridge, Conn.; Carol, of Missoula, Mont., and Susan, of Tempe, Ariz. All but Penny pursued careers relating to birds, Thomas as a researcher in endangered bird species for the Federal government, Carol as a bird researcher in Alaska and Montana, and Susan as a student of the spotted owl in the Northwest.

In 1965, a friend took Mrs. Snetsinger birding for the first time in Minnesota, and when her husband took a corporate job in Missouri she pursued her interest with a group of birders. (Birders adamantly spurn the term "birdwatcher" in the belief that it suggests a lack of gravity.) The group visited local woods and prairies each Thursday afternoon.

After birding came to represent a new lease on life to her, Mrs. Snetsinger began to take longer and longer trips. She was hooked when she visited Kenya and saw 500 different birds in three weeks. Her odyssey was aided by new technology for recording bird sounds, greater access to more and more remote habitats and the increasing numbers of tours being offered.

The depth of her enthusiasm is suggested by her response to a fall she took about six months ago while climbing a mountain in the Philippines: she stayed in the field for two additional weeks to see more birds.

The whole idea of listing birds, or at least the seriousness of the pursuit, is also sometimes criticized, or at least satirized. Indeed, it is called "the game" by birders themselves. "It's like collecting stamps or baseball cards," said Paul J. Baicich, editor of *Birding*, the magazine of the American Birding Association.

Snetsinger said his wife's competitive spirit was kept hidden, though he did not deny it existed. In a 1996 interview, she insisted that she wanted to play down her quantitative quest. "I'm going back to being a birder, not a lister," she said.

Ultimately, she felt very lucky, as she explained in an article to be published in next February's issue of *Birding*.

"Birding is the best and most exciting pursuit in the world, a glorified never-ending one," Mrs. Snetsinger wrote. "And the whole experience of a foreign trip, whether you see 10 new birds or 500, is simply too good to miss."

Field Trip Reports

Yellow-headed Blackbird in Morehead City

by Randy Emmitt

Will Cook, Judy Murray and I decided to head to Morehead City to look for the reported Yellow-headed Blackbird on April 8. After looking for about 10 minutes we found it and somehow I managed to get within 8-9 feet of it with my new 100-400 L IS lens and took several full frame photos of it in a Loblolly Pine. Never thought I could have gotten so close. I posted the photos on my web site at <http://www.rlephoto.com>. It was a state bird for both Will and me and a lifer for Judy. We also found a Orchard Oriole nearby singing in the top of a tree.

Then we headed into Croatan NF to look for butterflies and birds. The migrant warblers were Northern Parula, Prairie Warbler, Ovenbird and Yellow-throated Warbler. Also a few White-eyed Vireos were calling and we found a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher building a nest.

After leaving Croatan NF we stopped at a wonderful nature park in Kinston and saw wood ducks, Great Yellowlegs and Lesser Lellowlegs there. It looked to be an excellent birding and butterfly spot, but we arrived around 5:30 pm and the clouds were ready to downpour. Five of the seven butterfly species we found there were new county records as Lenior county has never really been surveyed for butterflies.

We did really well for butterflies considering it was partly cloudy and very windy (Will lost his hat 3 times). We found 24 species including the earliest Whirlabout and Fiery Skippers ever reported in NC.

Sightings

Anhingas: Over Mason Farm...

by Dennis Burnette

Two Anhingas (*Anhinga anhinga*) were observed on 4/8/00 soaring over Mason Farm Biological Reserve in Chapel Hill, NC. There probably are records of Anhingas in the NC Piedmont, but I have never seen them here and neither have other experienced birders in our group.

I was leading a group of nine birders from the Piedmont Bird Club (Guilford County, NC) on a scheduled annual field trip this morning at Mason Farm Biological Reserve. We had a permit to enter the property. We were approximately 150 feet from the parking area at about 10:15 a.m. scanning a tree for a bird that we had heard when I noticed a dark object out of focus in the sky beyond and above the tree. When I refocused, I saw first one bird, then two virtually identical very dark birds that appeared to have long pointed bills and necks, and long tails, quite unlike the Turkey Vultures we had seen soaring a few minutes earlier.

As the birds continued to soar and circle closer, I processed the shape and color, eliminating herons and cormorants. A conspicuous feature of the birds was the paler head, neck, and upper breast that looked light brown or beige, contrasting with the black or very dark brown bodies. Immature Double-crested Cormorants have brownish necks and dark bodies, but unlike cormorants, these birds had long straight thin necks with no visible kinks, and the bills were too thin and pointed to be cormorants. Despite the unlikely location, I realized that they must be Anhingas, probably females rather than immatures because of the very dark bodies. I have seen Anhingas, cormorants, and herons many times while living and birding in Florida, as well as on visits to the coastal areas of the Carolinas, the Caribbean, and in the tropics. I announced them to the group.

Before long, the birds were directly overhead so that all nine people in the group had to point their binoculars nearly straight up. I saw the birds clearly with my 10x binoculars, but the brown heads and necks were visible even with the naked eye. For several minutes a Red-tailed Hawk also was in the same field of view, but was soaring considerably lower and did not seem to be interacting with the Anhingas. We watch them as they soared from the north in approximately southerly direction until they were out of sight, a period of about 10 minutes.

As they seemed to be heading toward the general vicinity of Jordan Lake, it will be interesting to see if they are found again. They would make a good addition to the Spring Count.

... and Jordan Lake

by Emily DeVoto

On the morning of April 8, before the wind kicked in too seriously, Mark Schulz and I canoed along the edge of Jordan Lake, approximately between the swamp

at Big Woods Road. We heard Prothonotary Warblers but didn't see them, also heard Red-eyed and Yellow-throated Vireos, Common Yellowthroats, Ovenbirds, and Am. Redstarts. We got an unusually good look at a Yellow-throated Warbler.

The highlight, though, was three Anhingas, two males and a female, circling over the lake and trending northwest. (My first this far inland).

First American Oystercatcher at Jordan Lake

by Will Cook

On 4/15/2000 Doug Shadwick found an American Oystercatcher on the Crosswinds Marina breakwater at Jordan Lake (Chatham Co., NC). This is the first sighting ever for the area. Crosswinds Marina is on 1008 just north of US64, before the first bridge. This adult-plumaged bird was probably brought in by the southeast winds as it was migrating north.

I relocated the brown-backed oystercatcher on the right side of the breakwater at 3:30pm - it was just sitting there with its bill tucked in. Also there: 27 Caspian Terns, 1 Bonaparte's, 1 Herring among the Ring-billed Gulls, some breeding-plumaged Double-crested Cormorants (with double crests!), and Am Coots. Saw about 6 more Caspian Terns elsewhere for a great Jordan total of 33. The oystercatcher was not relocated the next day.

Sightings in Brief

Common Loon (1, calling) - 4/9/00 - Jordan Lake - Bob Chase
Cattle Egret (1) - circa 3/22-4/1/00 - southern Wake Co. - fide Karen Bearden
 Solitary Sandpiper (1) - 3/30/00 - Greenview Pond, Wake Co. - Steve Shultz
 Mandarin Duck (1, male, with Wood Ducks) - 3/26/00 - Big Woods Rd swamp, Chatham Co. - Rob Gluck. Presumably an escapee...
 Ruddy Duck (10) - 4/2/00 - Orange Co. - Barb Brooks
 N. Rough-winged Swallow (1) - 3/9/00 - Little Cr impdt, Dur. Co., Jim Bloor
 Ruby-throated Hummingbird (1, male) - 3/30/00 - Chatham Co - Marsha Stevens
 Ruby-throated Hummingbird (1) - circa 3/24/00 - Dur Co - fide Ted Zoller
Rufous Hummingbird (2: 1 male, 1 female) - 2/29/00 - Chapel Hill - Tom Driscoll.
 Approximate departure date for the wintering duo.
 Chimney Swifts - 4/2/00 - Durham - Jeff Pippen
 Chimney Swift (6) - 4/3/00 - Chapel Hill - Ginger Travis
 White-eyed Vireo (1) - 3/28/00 - Durham - Mike Schultz
 Yellow-throated Vireo (1) - 4/7/00 - Orange Co - Ginger Travis
 Brown Creeper (1) - 4/15/00 - Duke Gardens, Durham - Tom Driscoll
 Red-breasted Nuthatch (1) - 4/3/00 - Chat. Co. - Shelley Theye
 E. Bluebird (4 young hatched) - 4/6/00 - Durham - Russell Roberson
 Wood Thrush (1) - 4/6/00 - Chatham Co. - Kate Finlayson
 N. Parula (1) - 3/26/00 - Durham - Dianne Smith
 Ovenbird (1) - 4/3/00 - Chat. Co. - Shelley Theye
 Ovenbird (1) - 4/4/00 - Durham - Tom Driscoll
 Black-throated Green Warbler (4) - 4/8/00 - Eno R, Orange Co - Edith Tatum
 Black-throated Green Warbler (1) - 4/9/00 - Jordan Lake - Bob Chase
 Magnolia Warbler (1) - 4/9/00 - Jordan Lake - Bob Chase
 Chipping Sparrows - numerous people had small flocks of migrating Chippies in their yards during the first two weeks of April.

Club officers

President: Magnus Persmark (933-2255, emp34157@glaxowellcome.com)
Vice President (CH): Ginger Travis (942-7746, Ginger_Travis@unc.edu)
Secretary: Judy Murray (942-2985, jmurray.uncnson@mhs.unc.edu)
Treasurer: Fran Hommersand (967-1745)
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