

THE BULLETIN

Chapel Hill Bird Club

February, 2001

(Vol. XXX, No. 2)

c/o Ginger Travis
5244 Old Woods Rd.
Hillsborough, NC 27278

February meeting

Date and time: Monday, Feb. 26, 7:30 p.m.

Place: The lounge, **Binkley Baptist Church**, corner of Willow Drive and the Hwy. 15-501 Bypass (next to University Mall) in Chapel Hill. Entrance to the parking lot is on Willow Drive.

Program: North Carolina's Important Bird Areas and Coastal Island Sanctuaries by Walker Golder

Feb. program: important bird areas and coastal sanctuaries

By Karen Bearden

Walker Golder, deputy director of the North Carolina Audubon State Office, will talk about his work leading the N.C. Important Bird Areas initiative; these are areas designated as the state's most vital bird habitats and therefore worthy of protection. Walker grew up exploring the N.C. coast, and he developed an interest in colonial waterbirds as a student of Dr. James Parnell. He served as warden for Audubon's Battery Island sanctuary and was named Audubon's first manager of the newly-created N.C. coastal islands sanctuary program, a system that has grown to encompass 21 locations. Walker has received national recognition for his work, so we are delighted to have him share his knowledge and love of North Carolina's birds. Remember to come early for refreshments at 7:15. See you there.

February in the field. . .field trips

A lot happens in the field from now through early March -- but much of it happens quietly. Woodcock perform their twilight courtship flights. Waterfowl start slipping away from our lakes and heading north. Unnoticed, Winter Wrens leave and Fox Sparrows

too. Purple Martin scouts arrive. Osprey suddenly are seen at Jordan Lake again. And if Jordan gets very low (a big if) there may even be a few days of good spring shorebird-watching. A few forward hummingbirds will appear, particularly on the Raleigh side of the Triangle. And the earliest warblers will show up: Yellow-throated, Northern Parula and Louisiana Waterthrush. By mid-March the Triangle will be jumping. Join us in the field on Saturday mornings to witness some of these changes!

Trips leave the Glen Lennox parking lot (on the north side of Hwy. 54 just east of the 15-501 Bypass in Chapel Hill) at 7:30 a.m. sharp and return by noon. Beginners and visitors are welcome. Reservations are not necessary, but if you want details on where you'll be going, call Doug Shadwick (942-0479). Bring binoculars, a scope if you have one, and boots or old tennis shoes, and be prepared for a hike.

Trip report: CHBC's coastal blitz, Jan. 13-15

by Bruce Young

The annual CHBC trip to Lake Mattamuskeet and the coast kicked off early on Saturday morning, Jan. 13th (the Martin Luther King birthday weekend). Before it was over on Monday, 13 people would see a total of 125 species, and most of us would get at least one life bird. (But not Doug Shadwick, who has just seen too many birds.) Participants were Bob and Mary Chase, Judy Murray, Harriet Sato, Gail and Doug Cox, Ginger Travis, Patsey Bailey, Bruce Young, Rick Payne, Shantanu Phukan, and Willem Van Eck; our leader was Doug.

The group gathered through the morning on the 13th as we worked our way along the Mattamuskeet National Wildlife Refuge entry road and across the causeway. Some had been driving since the wee hours of the morning; Rick Payne, who

left Durham at 2 a.m., said it felt like he had been up for 105 hours in a row. But birding trips are not the time to catch up on your sleep. Although there were lower numbers of ducks than usual, there were still a good number of birds for us to peruse. Coots were ever-present, as they would be all weekend, and there were large numbers of Tundra Swans to admire. Pintails and Shovelers flew out of the reeds every time a resident immature Bald Eagle flew over but didn't ruffle a feather when a Merlin came flashing by no more than 50 feet in front of us. He posed in a nearby tree but of course picked a perch behind the only limb thick enough to hide him. He soon flew off. One of the yearly target birds for this trip is the Orange-crowned Warbler, which winters in good numbers around the lake. We winkled several out of the tangled undergrowth (and the crowds of yellow-rumps) over the course of the morning, thereby giving Patsy Bailey a life bird, our first of the trip.

After lunch, we birded down the Wildlife Trail, which had been closed in the morning for duck hunters. The hunters had done a good job because the impoundments were nearly empty of all birdlife. A few coots and some distant Black Ducks were all we could find in the way of waterfowl. Further down the trail, however, we found some good birds. A Virginia Rail made a quick appearance, disappearing into the grass after only a few of the party had seen it. A couple of House Wrens made their usual racket when we disturbed whatever it is House Wrens do on a warm winter day. Later, Doug's great ear picked out a Rusty Blackbird's song as we slowly drove down the dirt road, and we all piled out and got a good look.

Our usual late-afternoon search of Lake Landing, in two groups due to some direction snafus, turned up little because the nearby impoundments have been allowed to grow up in the past couple of years. A flyover Glossy Ibis salvaged a disappointing stop.

Sunday morning found us on the Outer Banks for a beautiful day. Warm sun and almost no wind made me wonder if we were in the right place. The Bodie Island lighthouse pond started us off with a number of ducks, but the highlight was Ginger Travis finding a White Ibis who had found himself breakfast, a short but thick and juicy snake. The ibis swallowed it, which is usually the end of the story, but this snake was a fighter. He actually writhed his way back out of the bird's throat and dropped into

the mud. The ibis recaptured him and had his breakfast, but the whole scene reminded us why nature and birdwatching are far more than just entertainment and another check on our list.

Over the course of the morning, at Oregon Inlet and Pea Island we saw many typical coastal birds; highlights included Great Cormorant, a good close look at a male Surf Scoter, and a Canvasback. After lunch, we made our way to Cape Hatteras. A Redhead in the pond next to the parking lot was a good omen, and we set out in two groups, one walking and one driving, to the point. Thousands of gulls covered the beach, and leisurely looks in wind-free conditions made it possible for us to pick out several Lesser Black-backed Gulls. Bob Chase found something a little different, one all-dingy-white bird. Once the two groups were together, a spirited discussion led us to the conclusion it was a second-winter Glaucous Gull. A life bird for many of us. Such gems are why the Cape point is the gull capital of the state.

Just before dark, as we all stood in the muddy boundary along the side of Highway 12, it was lightly drizzling and the temperature was dropping. We had been up for 12 hours at this point. This is the kind of activity that makes people think birdwatchers are a bit wrong in the head. To tell you the truth, sometimes I agree with them. But then Judy Murray spotted what we were there for -- a large bird coursing above the fields. In the gloaming, the bird was buffy-colored, with dark wrist patches like a Rough-legged Hawk. But the rounded wings and stubby face told us we had spotted a Short-eared Owl. Watching it fly around the field for about 30 seconds was worth a few minutes in the rain.

Monday morning we got up very early for a long, long drive to a beach in Virginia where a Snowy Owl had been seen. The fog was thick, hampering our search, and an hour's worth of searching turned up no owl. After a long, long drive back, we got onto the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel. The fog was still heavy, and there were few birds on or around the rock islands. From the island parking lots, we did see good numbers of Purple Sandpipers and the resident, french-fry-eating Ruddy Turnstones, but little else. Once we got off the bridge and onto the Eastern Shore, our short side trip to Kiptopeke Park turned up some distant, fog-shrouded Goldeneyes, but we couldn't determine if the reported male Barrow's Goldeneye was among them.

Another miss. All was forgiven, though, when we returned to the bridge and immediately found one male and two female Harlequin Ducks right next to the island. You would have to own a pet Harlequin Duck to get a better look than that. It was a fine ending to a long, satisfying trip.

Now if there were only some way to instantly transport yourself home and avoid that long, long (did I tell you it was long?) drive home....

Snow, birds, deer, and one reporter on the Falls Lake CBC

By Brian Bockhahn

The Falls Lake CBC on Dec. 30, 2000 had 16 observers in 11 parties, 66.25 total party hours, 156.25 total miles, one feeder counter with 8 hours, and 3.25 hours and 3.5 miles owling. Temps ranged from 18 to 34 and it SNOWED for about an hour in the morning.

A total of 90 species were recorded on count day; an additional 6 were seen in the count week (Common Snipe, Rufous Hummingbird, American Pipit, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Loggerhead Shrike and Wood Duck!) Misses were Northern Bobwhite, Savannah Sparrow, Northern Shoveler and Redhead, which had been present on the lake a few weeks prior. Fish Crow and any irruptive species were also not located.

With all still water frozen and 40%+ of the lake frozen, it was a strange day. Duck numbers were great, with high counts of Mallard and Black Duck. Hooded Mergansers numbered 800 for another high count, and one female COMMON MERGANSER was seen by Will Cook in Beaverdam Lake. There were many low numbers for loons, horned grebe and all raptors. The ever-present gull flock produced a high count of 16,604 Ring-billed Gull, 335 Herring, and 8 Great Black-backed Gulls. One of the Vulture Roosts this year was surprisingly not active, but when we located another, 100 Turkey and 73 Blacks were counted. A flock of 320 Rusty Blackbirds was a new species to the count, as well as a good high count. The only real rarity was the count week RUFIOUS HUMMINGBIRD.

A reporter and photographer from the (Raleigh) News and Observer came out for a story about the count. It turned into a personal interest story, but I didn't mind!! The reporter did call a flock of Ring-billed Gulls "seagulls" and mentioned

that Bluebirds were an exciting find, but otherwise it was great. I was impressed with the reporter's showing up at 5:30 a.m. to go owling in 18 degree weather. That's dedication!

Other oddities: Watching four deer swim out into the lake, encounter a sheet of ice, chop through it for about 200 feet, then, as it got too thick, turn around and head back. Seconds later a turkey flew across the lake; then another deer acting "strange" ran out into the lake and encountered the ice. In the scope we realized the deer had been shot by a hunter in the head and was going ballistic on the ice. It only took a minute for the deer to stop, and then sink.

We also used our scopes to watch some duck hunters pull up onto non-hunting land with their guns. One of the rangers who was with me left us to go have a quick "talk" with them.

Also at Rollingview we watched as a sheet of ice that covered half the lake was pushed toward the shore by the wind. Plates of ice 2 to 3 feet in diameter were breaking off and being pushed up onto the beach. Trees and buoys in the lake were breaking through, as the ice came in around them. As we left, a pile of ice pieces 50 feet long and one to two feet high was on the beach!

MANY THANKS to the volunteers who came out and froze for my count!

Millennial milestone – No. 600

by Kent Fiala

My final plan to reach my goal of an ABA area life list of 600 by the end of the second millennium was to take a long weekend December trip to Florida where I felt sure I'd find lifers Short-tailed Hawk and Greater Flamingo to reach 599, and then hope to eke out at least 1 more lifer on a year-end trip to the Rio Grande Valley. In the meantime a certain Green-breasted Mango showed up unexpectedly in November in Concord, N.C. as my 598th bird, greatly enhancing the significance of the Florida trip.

On my first full day in Florida I readily found at least 3 Short-tailed Hawks in Everglades National Park. (This proved to be fortunate because the second full day was gray and wet and no raptors were flying.) Then I headed for Snake Bight, the one place in the U.S. where presumed wild flamingos can be seen with some regularity. It's a nearly 2-mile hike one way, a hike that is legendary for its mosquitos, but I wore a head net and a long-sleeved shirt, and survived. At the observation platform at the end of

the trail I found about 7 other people also looking for flamingos, and no flamingos. But we did enjoy a Peregrine flyover, Bald Eagles, red and white phase Reddish Egrets, Great Blue and Great White Herons, and other coastal birds. Finally, scanning the entire bay, to everyone's relief I spotted 3 Greater Flamingos at a distance of probably 2 miles or more offshore. They were so far away that they were identifiable only with my scope zoomed to 60x, and even then with a little uncertainty until they stretched their heads up. Like an election win, a bird sighting isn't always as clean as you would like, but an ID is an ID. 600! The next day, demanding a recount, I made the hike a second time in the slim hope that some flamingos might be in closer to the shore, and indeed they were! There were 3 Greater Flamingos barely 75 yards from the observation platform, and they looked like 3 huge lawn ornaments -- 3 huge lawn ornaments with the number 600 painted on them. I observed them at leisure and then hiked back. As it was also my birthday, I wished I'd been willing to risk waiting until that day and had had this as my life sighting of flamingos. That night I counted roughly 200+ mosquito bites on myself, mostly on my arms. Fortunately I'm barely sensitive to them.

Footnote: I've never counted heard-only birds on my life list total, and for several years I've thought Black-chinned Sparrow was my only heard-only bird anyway. But in the process of finally getting most of my bird records entered into Avisys, I encountered a forgotten record of a heard Red-billed Pigeon. So if I were to change my personal rule and count heard birds, the Mango was my 600th, although I didn't realize that when I saw it. What a dilemma! Choose Green-breasted Mango or Greater Flamingo as No. 600. But in that season of wrangling over vote-counting rules, I decided to keep my original bird-counting rule.

And a travel note: to my surprise, early December seems to be very much off-season for tourists in the Everglades. It's a great, uncrowded time to visit for Florida winter specialties.

Oh yeah, 5 more lifers in Texas.

Winter hummingbird banding in the Carolinas

by Susan Campbell

This has been a very busy year of documenting, visiting and banding wintering hummingbirds in the area -- and it is not over yet! Close to 100

hummingbirds have been reported wintering around feeders and flowers across North and South Carolina. Since early November I have caught 10 Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, 15 Rufous Hummingbirds, 4 Black-chinned Hummingbirds and a Green Breasted Mango!!

The mango was an immature that appeared at the home of Lori Turner in Concord, N.C. about November 8th. I heard about it a week later and managed to catch and band it, confirming its identity on November 19th. It stayed around feeders in the yard, where it was visited by well over 500 folks from all over the U.S. until its disappearance on December 8th. Look for further details on this amazing little bird, which will be a first state record for N.C. (and the first ever reported outside of south Texas), in an upcoming issue of *The Chat*.

The Black-chinneds have been juveniles -- 2 females and, at long last, 2 males with a few black and purple feathers appearing in their gorgets. One female was in Charlotte, the other in Goldsboro, and the 2 males are at coastal feeders: 1 in Wilmington and 1 in Sunset Lakes.

Selasphorus hummingbirds (probably mostly Rufous) have been at feeders from the mountains to the sea. It has actually been a record year for reports of this genus all over the southeast. The abnormally cold weather has no doubt prompted more folks to report birds at their feeders. All of the Selasphorus that I have banded have been Rufous so far, but neither Allen's nor Broad-tailed can be ruled out until the birds are scrutinized closely in the hand. Most of the individuals have been immatures (7 females and 4 males) but I have found 2 adult females and 1 adult male at feeders. Also I recaptured an adult female Rufous in Shelby that I banded last year as a juvenile. Probably the most interesting report with regards to Rufous in North Carolina was the resighting of a banded hummer in the mountains in December. It was a female hummingbird originally banded and color-marked in Asheville by Bob Sargent just after Thanksgiving. However, it was found and identified by the bright yellow mark on its forehead at a different feeder a month later and 20 miles to the north!

Ruby-throated Hummingbirds have been documented only along the coast this winter. I have banded 7 in the Buxton area and 1 in Sunset Lakes. Another real highlight of the season was a second-year recapture of a male Ruby-throated in Buxton.

The hummingbird had been banded originally by the Sargents as a juvenile in the fall of 1998 and has now spent the past three winters in the same yard. In addition, many suspected Ruby-throated Hummingbirds have been reported in the Morehead City area, and I hope to check in on a number these birds over the winter CBC meeting weekend to find out for sure.

I have lots more work planned over the next month while the wintering hummers are still around. At least two trips to South Carolina are in the planning stages as well as a trip back to the Outer Banks and a return trip to the Wilmington area. I hope to also have time to make a trip to the mountains to look in on a few hummers at feeders in the Asheville area as well. It is certainly an exciting time!

Many thanks to all of the folks who have helped notify me of wintering hummers in the Carolinas. Without them and the cooperation of the hummer hosts, this work would not be possible. I am also indebted to the North Carolina State Museum of Natural Sciences, the Hummer/Bird Study Group and the private donors who have been so generous in their funding of my research this winter. It has been a tremendously successful season for hummingbird research here, largely due to the support and assistance of the birding community in the Carolinas. I am extremely grateful to you all.

Postscript, Feb. 1: Since I wrote the above, I have also banded 4 Ruby-throateds in Morehead City (a drop in the bucket there -- saw and heard about a lot more as well), 2 Rufous in Oriental and the Rufous in Durham yesterday [Josh Rose's -- see next].

Some special winter yardbirds

Compiled by G.T. from Carolinabirds

Hummers in the Triangle! Josh Rose (Durham) identified a late-January visitor to his yard as a "female-type *Selasphorus*," which Susan Campbell trapped on Jan. 31; she identified it positively as a healthy immature female Rufous. Susan said, "This hummer rounds out Rufous found in the Triangle area this winter -- with one each in Raleigh, Durham, Chapel Hill and Cary. Wow!" The Chapel Hill bird was in Randy Bishop's yard; it was captured by Susan in early Jan. and determined to be an adult female Rufous. The Raleigh Rufous was

seen by Joe Harris during count week for the Raleigh CBC.

Although 2001 is not shaping up to be the classic finch winter that we enjoyed last year, Doug Shadwick on Jan. 31 had a terrific sighting of a male Red Crossbill at his feeder in Chapel Hill. The crossbill appeared to have faint wingbars, but Doug checked a reference on finches (Clement, Harris and Davis, p. 299 and picture, p. 300) and concluded his bird was not a White-winged, rather an aberrant-plumaged Red. Two Pine Siskins were reported by Shelley Theye on Jan. 13 in her northern Chatham Co. yard, and on Jan. 18 she also reported four Purple Finches, along with an immature Baltimore Oriole. Another Baltimore Oriole popped up in Raleigh in the yard of Karen and Joe Bearden (Jan. 18); they spotted it at a neighbor's place and waited for two days until it finally came over to their side to eat suet. Doug Shadwick also had a Baltimore in his yard the third week in January, and Josh Rose in Durham had one as well.

One for your bookshelf

by Ginger Travis

John Fussell is one of the two or three best-known birders in North Carolina. He had, and probably still has, the largest N.C. list of anyone -- a few ticks north of 400. ("And nobody'll ever catch him," Paula Wright was once heard to say, though that's certainly debatable!) He's generous with his knowledge, too. He's the author of the indispensable *A Birder's Guide to Coastal North Carolina* (UNC Press, 1994), and he frequently posts directions on Carolinabirds to Carteret County rarities. I owe two life birds to his postings -- Lincoln's Sparrow (one showed up at a Carteret County feeder last year) and Eurasian Collared Dove, a whole flock of which spent this January in a Beaufort cemetery.

But I didn't know until recently that in 1985 John Fussell self-published *Finding Birds in Carteret County*, a pocket-sized book with maps by Carolyn Hoss. I only found this out as I sat in Carolyn and Don Hoss's family room and stared out into their azalea thickets while waiting for that secretive Lincoln's Sparrow to appear -- yep, it was at their feeder. When Carolyn told me about working with John on *Finding Birds in Carteret County*, I bought a copy on the spot and have been very happy with it. (Can't remember the price, but I think it was \$10 or

less.) For exploring Carteret County, this is a terrific book.

Carteret sits right in the middle of the N.C. coast and has a surprisingly long shoreline – extending from Portsmouth Island (near Ocracoke) down the Core Banks to Cape Lookout, back west along Shackleford Banks, across Beaufort Inlet to Bogue Banks with Fort Macon and the towns of Atlantic Beach, Salter Path and Emerald Isle, and ending at Bogue Inlet--with Swansboro and the White Oak River, Morehead City, Beaufort and Harkers Island all lying landward behind the barrier islands. Also within this county are the majestic Cedar Island marshes with their Black Rails and the Millis Road savannah with its Red-cockaded Woodpeckers and Bachman's Sparrows.

You can certainly find your way to all these places with Fussell's *A Birder's Guide to Coastal North Carolina*, but you can learn a bit more if you have *Finding Birds in Carteret County* too. And where the Carteret County book really shines is in its very well-drawn maps – more of them, on a larger scale, and more detailed than the maps in the coastal North Carolina guide. One example is the fine map for the complex of islands and shoals that comprise the Rachel Carson sanctuary across Taylor's Creek from Beaufort. As a kayaking birder, I really appreciate good coastal maps, and I used the Beaufort map in January to try to find Piping Plovers out on Bird Shoal. (Fog rolled in just as I got there, frustrating my search, but that's another story.)

Finding Birds in Carteret County is available for sale in Beaufort at the Beaufort Historical Society on Turner Street and in Morehead City at DeeGee's on the waterfront. If you're going to be spending time down on the central coast, you might be very glad to have it.

The downhill side of winter

by Ginger Travis

It's easy to imagine you're over the top and coasting downhill out of winter, when you see Red-shouldered Hawks start their nest-building. On Feb. 2 I watched one of these hawks in a sweetgum tree along Dogwood Acres Drive, south of Chapel Hill. The hawk looked really goofy, clambering out into the fine twigs at the end of a branch, where it swayed and flopped. What could it be doing, I wondered. All became clear when it snapped off a twig with its beak and flew across the street to deliver the twig to

a nest site. A second hawk then flew to the platform of sticks to perform the construction. It (she?) busily moved around on the pile, seeming to mash down the sticks and occasionally to pick up one or two and rearrange them.

I assume this is the same pair of hawks that has been around Dogwood Acres for several years, and their nesting behavior is interesting. For one thing, they construct a new nest each year, apparently not reusing the prior year's nest. The new nest is always very close to the old one – not much more than 50 yards away. These birds really like their neighborhood! They always choose a deciduous tree with at least a 3-way branching in the main trunk to build on. (This year's is a 4-way in a tulip poplar.) And they build high – 30 or 40 feet up.

Unfortunately, last year's nesting came to naught. The female sat for eons, but no babies. But all beginnings are promising, and hawks starting a nest in February are wonderful harbingers of spring.

Tundra swans by moonlight

by John Argentati

from Carolinabirds

Just before bed last night [Feb. 6], I stepped out onto our balcony to get a breath of fresh air and enjoy the beautiful full moon. On the beaver pond (Greenview Pond, Raleigh) I could see two ghostly figures moving slowly about. I knew they were the Tundra Swans that arrived the other day. When I looked through my binoculars I was treated to a magnificent sight.... The image of those two Tundra Swans bathed in moonlight on a mirror-still pond is forever etched on my mind. I wish you could have been there to enjoy it.

Little red circle on your mailing label?

Time to renew your CHBC membership. Why not reenlist for 2 years or more? 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.