

# THE BULLETIN

## Chapel Hill Bird Club

February, 2002

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c/o Ginger Travis

5244 Old Woods Rd.

Hillsborough, NC 27278

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### February meeting – pelagic birding

**When:** Monday, Feb. 25, 7:15 p.m. for refreshments; meeting begins at 7:30.

**Where:** The lounge at Binkley Baptist Church in Chapel Hill. Binkley is at the corner of Willow Drive and the 15-501 Bypass (east side of Chapel Hill) next to University Mall.

**What/Who:** Mike Tove will be giving a program on pelagic birding. Mike wrote the book on this subject – literally. He's the author of *Guide to the Offshore Wildlife of the Northern Atlantic*. Mike has given CHBC some entertaining programs in the past, and this should be another good one. See you there!

### Memorial Day weekend pelagic trips

There may still be time to sign up for a CHBC weekend of pelagic birding May 24 and 25. Check with the organizer, Doug Shadwick (942-0479), if you're interested. The back to back trips are out of Hatteras and Manteo with Brian Patteson, and this particular weekend fills up way ahead of time. You can book just one trip or both.

### Eagle counters needed

Kate Krulia is the new coordinator for Jordan Lake eagle counts, and she came to the Jan. 28 CHBC meeting specifically to try to recruit some new volunteer eagle counters. If you would like to count eagles for a couple of hours four times a year, please contact Kate: 933-1245 or krulia\_k@yahoo.com. As many of you know – but some may not – Bald Eagles first appeared at Jordan Lake in the 1980s, and the counts date from the late 80s. Eagles are seen in all months of the year, but Kate says that the highest count is in July.

### That little nagging voice . . .

Don't forget to renew your CHBC membership if you're due (01/02 on the mailing label). Write a check for \$15 (one year) made out to the Chapel Hill Bird Club. Send it to Ruth Roberson, 3406 Ogburn Ct., Durham 27705. Thanks!

### Memories are made of this!

by Bruce Young

The Chapel Hill Bird Club's annual trip to Lake Mattamuskeet and the Outer Banks took place over the Martin Luther King Day holiday weekend (Jan. 19-21). Participants included, at various times, Doug Shadwick (our fearless leader), Judy Murray, Karen Piplani, Jill Froning, John Kennedy, Rick Payne, Ken Lundstrom, and Bruce Young. We found a total of 114 bird species over the weekend, but a list of birds is boring. What really stands out from the weekend is a series of images.

Egret feeding: We found a Snowy Egret feeding right along the side of the road on Pea Island. We were able to pull up within 10 feet and watch her as she used one foot to stir up the mud then use her bill to pick out the little fishes she flushed.

Heron feeding: At Mattamuskeet we found a Great Blue Heron who had caught an enormous fish. It was at least 15 inches long and quite large around. Even he seemed perplexed about how he was going to manage to get this fish down. We watched for about 10 minutes but he still hadn't decided. We came by a few minutes later and the fish was gone. Did he eat it?

Wren feeding: It was a day for big food at Mattamuskeet on Saturday. We found a House Wren fighting to subdue a large locust-looking bug. The bug was probably half the size of the wren but the wren was persevering. Lucky for her it was still early on a cool morning so the bug was still a little torpid. The last we saw, the wren managed to pull the bug down into the grass, presumably to finish it off. She wasn't going to have to hunt any more that day.

Art: At the Duke of Dare in Manteo we were all appreciating the wonderful paintings in one of our rooms. There was a painting over each bed, one of a sunset in a marsh and the other a broken rowboat beside some driftwood. They were almost Vermeer-like in their realism (heh heh). But we were amused to find that when we went to another room, we found the same picture of a rowboat and driftwood hanging proudly over *each* bed. I guess so there would be no fighting about who got to sleep under the better picture.

Rare gulls: At one of the culverts underneath the causeway at Mattamuskeet, we were admiring some Black Skimmers that had come inland, and trying to learn the difference between 1st year Great Black-backed Gulls and Herring Gulls. On the other side were some Bonaparte's Gulls. But on further review...they weren't all Bonaparte's. One of them had a red bill! Twenty minutes of looking and chasing and finally getting good scope-views of the bird let us identify a Common Black-headed Gull. He was a bit larger than the Bonaparte's with a longer, red bill, red legs, and dark triangles in the underwing primaries. You have to look carefully sometimes to pick out the really good birds.

Ferry rides: Riding the ferry we had several close glimpses of birds you don't generally see up close. Fly-by Surf Scoters gave us good looks at the clownish white, orange, and black bill and head. Several Long-tailed Ducks (nee Oldsquaw) showed off their beautiful white, black, and brown patterning. And we saw over a hundred Red-throated Loons. Flying looks so tiresome to them I wonder why they do it.

Cleanliness: On Monday I guess we were getting tired. We all piled into Jill's car to make things easier. But over the course of the morning we turned the Jill-mobile into the Spill-mobile. Every liquid we carried was spilled: coffee, hot water, tea, coke, and soup. The soup was a particularly impressive spill. Only Jill and I were in the car at that point and I was driving. Unfortunately, she put her soup down on the dashboard just as I pulled out of a driveway. It was green and it was thick and it was everywhere. I swear that when I got home and unpacked, there was soup in the pockets of the jeans that had been in the bottom of my duffel bag.

Common birds that weren't: Last year the water in the office-road impoundment at Mattamuskeet was covered in American Coots. Thousands of them everywhere. This year, none. We didn't see a single coot at Mattamuskeet. And we didn't see a single pigeon all weekend (much to Jill's chagrin). You never think you're going to miss pigeons, until you're looking for them.

Common birds that were: Robins...everywhere. And blackbirds. At Mattamuskeet we watched a stream of blackbirds in the distance flying to a roost just before dark. We were out there for about half an hour and the line of blackbirds stretched from horizon to horizon the entire time. I started to think that maybe they were just flying in a circle because otherwise there were hundreds of thousands of them.

Posing birds: While flying along Route 12 on the Outer Banks we spotted a large shape atop a telephone pole. From experience we thought it might be a Peregrine. It was. A beautiful adult falcon posed on a pole and didn't care a bit about a carful of people piling out, training scopes on him, and oohing and aahing. We were so close we could see how sharp the talons were. A half mile later, the procedure was repeated with a juvenile Merlin who

also posed nicely for us. Falcons are so accommodating when you aren't a small bird.

Calm days: Monday on the banks was the calmest day I for one have ever enjoyed out there. We were out before dawn and were at Bodie Lighthouse as the sun was rising. The water was completely still and the beautiful sunrise was perfectly captured in it. For fun I tried to identify a flying duck by looking only at its reflection in the water. It was a Common Pintail.

The chase: All weekend we heard Marsh Wrens. It seemed every little bit of marsh had them. But could we get one to come out? Nooooo. We had several people for whom a Marsh Wren would be a lifer, but we couldn't get one good look in three days. I guess that's why we get more excited seeing a Marsh Wren than a Cardinal.

One that got away: I swear it was a Sora. Really. She was small, and chunky, and brownish as she flew across the canal at Mattamuskeet and ran into the grass. Couldn't she have stopped for two seconds?

In between these moments were lots of good birds and lots of good fun. So the next time you find yourself reading a story like this and thinking "Boy, I wish I was the one who maybe saw a Sora," well, get on out there. There's always room for one more, just don't sit next to Jill (with soup).

## **Falls Lake CBC report**

*by Brian Bockhahn, compiler*

On Saturday, December 29, 2001, the Falls Lake Christmas Bird Count had a new high of 21 volunteers in 12 parties, who covered sites around Falls Lake counting birds. Due to the increased participation and coverage, higher numbers of most birds were found. The warm temperatures of late fall and early winter resulted in low numbers of winter waterfowl and a complete lack of some waterfowl species and winter irruptives.

Waterfowl were seen in low numbers; usually uncommon were 1 Gadwall, 2 American Wigeon, 3 Green-winged Teal and 10 Lesser Scaup. Ring-necked Duck went from last year's high of 383 to an all-time low of 16. Falls Lake led North Carolina last year with a record 800 Hooded Mergansers; this year's warm weather brought the count down to 153. For the first time on the count day 3 Common Goldeneyes were recorded. A new vulture roost was found, resulting in new record high counts of 266 Turkey and 185 Black Vultures. Increased coverage resulted in 9 total Bald Eagle sightings and 11 American Kestrels (new highs). A total of 29 Wild Turkeys were reported from five separate parties, and five Northern Bobwhite were seen. Usually missed, 3 Common Snipe were reported, and new to the count were 2 American Woodcock. Gull numbers were normal with 14,489 Ring-billed (last year's 16,604 tally was second in the United States), 101 Herring, and high counts of 11 Lesser and 12 Great Black-backed Gulls. Dove and owl numbers were normal; 8 Great Horned Owls comprised a new high count.

Woodpecker numbers were good, showing the increased participant coverage. 2 Blue-headed Vireos were noted and 21 Fish Crows. 10 House Wrens were reported for a new high, Winter Wrens were low with only 16 individuals. One Gray Catbird was a new record for the count. Cedar Waxwings were low at 72; the other winter irruptive species did not show, with only a single Purple Finch seen at a feeder. Increased coverage of field areas resulted in higher numbers of sparrows. A high count of 6 Savannah Sparrows was reported, and a Lincoln's Sparrow was also reported (this would be a new record). Blackbird numbers were low with only 7 Red-winged and 82 Rusty Blackbirds reported. (Last year Falls Lake had a state high 320 Rusty Blackbirds.)

## Raleigh CBC results

by John Connors, compiler

Hi, birders. Finally received reports from all 16 groups that were out on December 15, 2001. As you may remember it was quite warm, with beautiful weather and temperatures approaching 60 degrees F. Over 75 participants surveyed the traditional sites in southern Wake County. In fact, almost as many birders as species of birds tallied. We totalled 84 species of birds...our lowest species total since 1970! It wasn't for lack of effort. We did find some good species: Virginia Rail, White-eyed Vireo, 3 Red-breasted Nuthatches, 2 Sedge Wrens, 3 Pine Siskins and 10 Palm Warblers. The misses were more noteworthy: Green-winged Teal, Pintail, Shoveler, Gadwall, Canvasback, Bald Eagle, Herring Gull, Black Vulture, American Pipit and Baltimore Oriole. There are some likely explanations: the landfill in southeastern Raleigh closed a few years back so we have far fewer gulls and vultures; Yates Mill Pond has been re-created after damage from Hurricane Fran and has not yet recovered its submerged aquatic vegetation; the beaver ponds at Greenview Pond collapsed and drained in late summer so the shallows which attracted the dabbling ducks were dry and the DOT-reconfigured ponds at that site have yet to grow submerged aquatic vegetation; and then the situation in the mainstay Raleigh lakes (Wheeler, Benson, Raleigh, Johnson) continues to be grim for waterfowl. Water, water everywhere but...hardly a duck in site. Hydrilla is a noxious introduced aquatic weed that once choked these lakes and attracted lots of waterfowl who like to eat it. Exotic sterile grass carp were introduced to remove the hydrilla, and did that, but ate everything else as well. There is little for waterfowl to eat at these lakes and numbers, particularly of diving ducks, have plummeted in our counts. Wonder what has happened with the rest of the aquatic ecological system? Is the cure here worse than the illness? Anyway, it was an enjoyable count with important info, and some footnotes.

## CBC winter meeting a hit!

by Steve Shultz

Members of the Carolina Bird Club enjoyed a beautiful mid-winter meeting weekend along North Carolina's Outer Banks January 25-27. The Outer Banks meetings tend to be well attended both for the natural scenery of the area and for the frequency that rare species of birds are found during the weekend.

Even the drive to the Banks from inland areas can be exciting. A flock of more than fifty Tundra Swans along the roadside caused many birders to pull off on the shoulder of US64 east of Rocky Mount, while a mile or so down the road five Snow Geese added to the swelling count of "big white birds."

CBC meetings generally offer field trips on Friday and Saturday, leaving Sunday for birders to chase whatever rarities were located during the previous two days or spend some time enjoying the non-birding attractions of the area. Programs related to birding, conservation, and other relevant topics are presented Friday and Saturday nights, with plenty of time in between for meeting old friends and making new ones. Since many of the most active birders from North and South Carolina are present, it is often possible to see if one's mental picture of a birder known only from Carolinabirds postings is accurate!

Many attendees took a side trip to Mattamuskeet NWR on the way to Nags Head to try and spot the Common Black-headed Gull originally found by participants from the Chapel Hill Bird Club's recent Outer Banks birding weekend. Most who tried were successful on Friday; however, those that waited until the trip back home on Sunday found the gull difficult to locate.

Friday evening activities included refreshments from the Cape Hatteras Bird Club and an informative talk by local birder Mike Tove on his recently published book on offshore wildlife of the northern Atlantic. Many folks decided to get an early jump on a good night's sleep in anticipation of an early morning field trip in what promised to be excellent weather.

Friday's brisk winds died over the night, and Saturday dawned warm and still. The weather forecast boded well for the planned pelagic boating trip from Hatteras as well as the land-based fieldtrips leaving from Nags Head. Groups of birders led by expert trip leaders fanned out across the Outer Banks and nearby inland areas hoping to locate a rarity, observe common species, and just enjoy the brilliant weather.

Saturday evening's social events began with refreshments provided by the North Banks Bird Club and ended with the anticipated countdown of species sighted during the weekend's events. In between Chris Canfield, director of Audubon activities in North Carolina, provided a presentation on bird conservation opportunities available to birders and other "citizen scientists."

The focal point of the evening for many was the countdown. Led by my meeting organizer Susan Campbell, the list of ticks for the weekend gradually built to the low 170's. Special attention was paid to the sighting of a Western Kingbird by Van Atkins and a Western Grebe by Jeff Pippen and group. Karen Bearden described a rare sighting of a Humpback Whale from the beach near the Pea Island visitor center.

While the meeting officially adjourns Saturday evening, many birders joined a field trip to the Pine Island sanctuary administered by NC Audubon. Others made solo trips to favored spots or joined small groups to locate particularly desirable species. Many folks stopped by the Alligator River NWR to view the very cooperative Western Kingbird and try for the not-as-cooperative Ash-throated Flycatcher and Rough-legged Hawks.

The next Carolina Bird Club meeting will take place in Black Mountain/Asheville, NC the first weekend in May. If you have never attended a CBC meeting, give it a try, you might become hooked! If you have attended past meetings you are probably already making plans to attend the next one; they are definitely fun!

## Birding Belize (pt. 1)

by Harriet Sato

This past April I went to Belize on a 10-day bird trip with a tour group. Belize, I found out, is the size of Rhode Island and has a population of only 250,000 (smaller than Raleigh's), but it took us much longer to get around to different sites because the roads were mostly unpaved and had many potholes and pebbles. We went to 3 different spots: Crooked Tree Wildlife Preserve, Lamanai Outpost Lodge and the well-known Chan Chich. We ended up with a grand total of 268 species.

Crooked Tree Preserve is bordered by the village of Crooked Tree and by a lagoon. The lodge at Crooked Tree was the simplest and the most homey of the three. It was owned and operated by a Belizean woman with help from local women. We 10 participants were the only lodgers. Food was home cooked and simple. We tasted a most delicious cashew nut jelly that the owner had made. She told us that a cashew nut festival is held annually in the village.

Naturally we went on a leisurely boat trip on the lagoon where we saw hundreds of Limpkins on the mudflats and islets. Every time we heard a loud croak it turned out to be a Limpkin. To think I was thrilled to see one Limpkin in Florida. Other waterbirds we saw included woodstorks, egrets, Grey-necked Woodrails, White Ibis, Black-necked Stilts and Northern Jacanas.

One day we walked through the dusty village to look for local birds. Amongst the few tropical trees, grassy areas, muddy spots and bushy sites we saw a surprising number of birds. Among them were 3 different hummingbirds (Green-breasted Mango,

Fork-tailed Emerald and Rufous-tailed Hummingbird); several raptors (Crane Hawk, Bicolored Hawk, Gray Hawk, Roadside Hawk, Snail Kites – which were quite common – and a Bat Falcon); Black-headed Tropic; Melodious Blackbirds; Blue-black Grassquit; and numerous Variable Seedeaters. At dusk we stopped to wait for a pair of aricari to come in to their roost, which was a small hole in a small tree in a small clearing. Aricari is a smaller version of the toucan and more colorful. At first we demurred and stood about 10 feet from the tree. But at the urging of the local guide we edged up to about 6 feet. Sure enough, the pair came in – in laps. They flew a certain distance, perched on a branch and surveyed the surroundings. They repeated the process until they reached the tree and quickly struggled and forced themselves through the hole.

Our next stop was Lamanai, which we reached by bus and by boat. It was a much bigger operation owned by an Australian married to an American who was born in Africa. The grounds were beautifully landscaped. The individual lodges were separated from each other by tropical plants and flowers. The owners, we learned, were involved in the local community and taught and employed local villagers in many different capacities. The dining room was like a family room where guides, staff and visitors mingled freely. One evening our entertainment was a presentation by one of the researchers on the rehabilitation of 2 baby howler monkeys who were rescued from some villagers.

One of the Lamanai trips was a walk through a jungle where Mayan archeological sites were located. One morning we climbed up an old Jaguar temple where several trees, including a fig tree, were at eye level. We were suddenly surrounded by hundreds of birds on a feeding frenzy, an experience all birders dream about. We were busy trying to focus on some familiar warblers – Tennessee, Magnolia, Black-throated Green, Yellow-throated and Hooded – as well as Black-headed and Grayish Saltators, Yellow-throated and Olive-backed Euphonias, Red-legged Honeycreepers, grassquits, flycatchers and others. This lasted for about half an hour when the birds just as suddenly disappeared.

At the base of the temple we got lucky again as an ant swarm passed through and attracted a Royal Flycatcher, ant-tanagers, 3 different kinds of woodcreepers (Olivaceous, Ivory-billed and Tawny-winged), a Chestnut-colored Woodpecker, and 3 different kinds of trogons (Violaceous, Slaty-tailed and Black-headed). On our inevitable boat trip we saw all the available kingfishers: Ringed, Belted, Amazon, Green and Pygmy. (*Cont'd. next month.*)

## Also coming in March . . .

List totals from more people, in more categories, than you'd ever imagine. Plus the complete Christmas Bird Count report. Tune in next month!