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Brown-headed Nuthatch by Doug Pratt

Chapel Hill Bird Club Bulletin

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Next Meeting

Monday, October 24, 2016

Time and location: 7:15 pm refreshments; 7:30 pm meeting. Olin T Binkley Baptist Church, corner of Highway 15-501 Bypass and Willow Drive, behind University Mall, Chapel Hill, NC

Members and guests are welcome to gather for dinner at the K & W Cafeteria (University Mall) at 6 pm before the meeting. Go to the back room of the cafeteria to join the group after making your dinner selection.

October 24, 2016 Program
Coexisting with Wildlife: A Practical Guide to Common Human-Wildlife Interactions and How to Handle Them
Speaker: Jessie Birckhead

People across North Carolina are increasingly interacting with wildlife in their daily lives. These close encounters can be exciting but too often end in trouble for the animals involved. Jessie Birckhead, Extension Wildlife Biologist for the NC Wildlife Resources Commission, will share stories and practical advice for addressing interactions with wildlife - from helping cattle farmers deal with black vulture depredation to debunking the myth of

"orphaned" fawns. Jessie will share tips and resources to address problem situations, and provide ideas for how to talk to others about interacting with wildlife.

About the Speaker: Jessie Birckhead is the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission's Extension Wildlife Biologist. Her work focuses on understanding human-wildlife interactions and helping landowners and citizens coexist with wildlife. A native North Carolinian, Jessie received her B.S. in Fisheries and Wildlife Management from North Carolina State University and her M.S. in Wildlife Science from the University of Tennessee Knoxville. Prior to joining the Wildlife Resource Commission, she worked as an environmental educator, policy researcher, and biologist with state agencies and nonprofits in North Carolina and Tennessee. Most recently she worked as a science communicator for The Nature Conservancy. Jessie calls Durham, NC home and can most often be found with her wildlife biologist husband and their mutt, Sophie, hiking, fishing, and birding around the Eno River.

Can you go home again? Apparently so!

by Maria de Bruyn (<https://mybeautifulworldblog.com/>)



This year, I had the good fortune to see both brown-headed nuthatches (*Sitta pusilla*) and Eastern bluebirds (*Sialia sialis*) raise broods in some of my nest boxes. But during September and October, I saw a behavior that I don't remember from years past. The nuthatches started to return to their nest box almost daily. They didn't check out nearby boxes but went to their original home, sitting on top, fluttering around it and looking inside.

It's not only the parents doing this, but also one or more of their offspring. So how true is the saying "you can never go home again" (origin a novel by Thomas Wolfe)? People do often journey back to the places where they grew up and apparently birds do, too! Maybe they are wondering if their nest box is still a good place for a home?

The bluebirds began doing the same with their home nest box. While the nuthatches just lean and peer inside, the bluebirds eventually go inside for a bit. Oddly, there seems to be some contention involved. For example, when this pair was investigating, they had a little tiff for some reason.



I can only guess that the birds are checking out the nest boxes in anticipation of next year's nesting season. The nuthatches and bluebirds will begin breeding again around March, although nuthatches might already begin building a new nest as early as December. It will also be interesting to see if they end up roosting in the boxes during the colder winter nights.

2016 Gray-cheeked Thrush Program, Falls Lake, NC

by Brian K. Pendergraft

It was December 30, 1988 when I decided to look more in-depth at a budding desire I was developing for birds. I had purchased a birding diary, which gave me the opportunity to document the famous "Life List". This led me into another world of birding that I have loved ever since. The life list created the opportunity for me to step outside of my current skillset, and learn about new species. It also eventually led me to travel to wonderful places in North America, and learn about new species that I had never seen before. Approaching 630 ABA species now, my passion for birds has grown to new heights, and although it is not a 24/7 hobby, I try to get out as much as possible. While I don't fanatically chase life birds, I do take the time to pick up one when I can, as I did in central Texas this spring for the Golden-cheeked Warbler and the Black-capped Vireo.



Gray-cheeked Thrush by Michael Stewart



Wood Thrush by Brian Pendergraft

A few years ago, good friends of mine (Dan Hudson, Steve Shultz, and Lewis Burke) started looking at the year list idea, whereby a birder documents as many species as they can in one year. I absolutely love this concept because it gives me another shot at seeing numerous species each and every year. Multiple looks at a species only enhances your birding knowledge. Depending on whether I travel outside of North Carolina or not, I typically see anywhere from 250-400 species in a year. This concept gets me out there enjoying even the most common species, and I have become a better birder because of the year list idea.

But when it comes right down to it, "backyard" birding is truly my passion. I started keeping monthly records of backyard birds in 1996 in Cary, NC where I had 1/3 of an acre in a residential neighborhood. In December of 1999 I moved to northern Wake County near Falls Lake. My now three acres have been selectively manicured to create a National Wildlife Habitat, and first and foremost bring in as many species as I can. I removed numerous pines, to give other more bird friendly hardwoods a chance to thrive, and become more visible during spring and fall migration. I planted numerous bushes and shrubs for nesting opportunities, and I added many flowering plants to attract hummingbirds and butterflies. I added feeding stations that includes many varieties of food and the all-important watering stations. It is my strong belief, that the more common species that visit your yard, the more transient species you will see during the spring and fall. I have had 126 species visit the yard, including flyovers, but most have been seen in the habitat that I have created.

Thrush program cont.

It was October....2005, when the initial Gray-cheeked Thrush was identified, and after continuous yearly visits to the yard, I began to think about the idea of the Gray-cheeked Thrush Program. I wanted an easy birding experience for birders who wanted to learn more about the most elusive "brown" thrush in North Carolina. This most northernmost nester of all the eastern thrushes, is only seen during fall migration here in the central piedmont, and most birders don't see it at all. Here on my property, the Gray-cheeked Thrush has been both reliable and cooperative due to the numerous mature eastern dogwoods, and the red berries they produce in September and October. Along with the Wood Thrush, Swainson's Thrush, and the Hermit Thrush in the middle of October, it is possible to see all four thrush species in one day. Instead of trampling all over the Blue Ridge Parkway, and hoping to see or hear a Gray-cheeked, a birder could spend a couple of hours with me, and get up close and personal with all the thrush species.

Finally, after years of studying the comings and goings of all the thrushes, including the identifications, their feeding habits, and most importantly, their arrivals and length of stay, I decided in 2013 to give everyone a chance to visit my property. The group size the first year was 30 birders, and right away I realized that I may have something unique. Birders participated in a relaxing birding experience, with little or no effort to see the thrushes, warblers, and many other species which happened to wander into the yard. I had a very enthusiastic group of birders, who were anxious to learn more about the thrushes, some of which needed the Gray-cheeked Thrush for a life bird. Each year the program grew, with many birders coming back each year, and the birds almost never let us down.

The 2016 Gray-cheeked Thrush program began on October 1st, and everything was in place to have another enjoyable and productive experience. Ninety birders had signed up for the eight days of the program, and my expectations were high. The Swainson's Thrushes started to arrive in the first week of September, and the Wood Thrushes became frequent visitors to the berries during the middle of the month. A pair of Veerys showed up on the 5th, but they only hung around for a couple of days. Scarlet Tanagers, Red-eyed Vireos, and the first Rose-breasted Grosbeaks were tearing up the berries in late September. After a very warm late summer, the temperatures started to back off a little. Rain was plentiful in the spring and early summer, however drier conditions existed now. Warblers seen before the program included Chestnut-sided, Magnolia, Black and White, Northern Parula, Hooded, Yellow-throated, and Worm-eating. The monthly September yard count was approaching the record of 67, and things were certainly looking about normal. But when was the Gray-cheeked Thrush going to show up?

On September 20th, the first Gray-cheeked showed up to start the yearly gorging before heading south. When the program started on Saturday, October 1st I only had one Gray-cheeked. Fifty-seven birders flocked to the yard from the 1st through the 5th, many for the second, third, and fourth time. Almost everyone left with glorious looks at the Gray-cheeked Thrush, as well as the Swainson's and Wood Thrushes. The lateness of the summer temperatures had the numbers of thrushes down, as well as the warblers, however we were able to see some good stuff. The day-by-day accounts are summarized below, which each day being a little different.

Thrush program cont.

Saturday, October 1st - Weather: 67F – 75F (fog early) - Species Count: 35

The program officially started at 8:00, but a few folks wanted to come by earlier to look for any fall warblers that may be present. Typically, early August can be good for Bay-breasted, Cape May, Blackpoll, Black-throated Blue, Black-throated Green, a late Blackburnian, along with the ever-present Magnolia, Chestnut-sided, and American Redstart. I typically see 15 or 16 warbler species in the fall, and a lot of times I am seeing the birds before 8:00. Today we had awesome looks at a very cooperative BAY-BREASTED WARBLER. Numerous photographs were taken of this uncommon fall visitor. Other warblers on this day included Pine, American Redstart, and Black and White. The early morning fog, and stubborn southerly winds are keeping a lot of the warblers away from my little piece of heaven.

We located the program's first Gray-cheeked Thrush high in a maple around 9:00am. The bird provided us with decent looks, albeit about forty feet up. It did stay almost motionless for several minutes, and three birders got their first Gray-cheeked! That's always special! The group saw one Wood Thrush, and a couple of us saw a Swainson's Thrush as well. The first day of the program was definitely highlighted by six (6) ROSE-BREASTED GROSBEAKS. I've never seen this many at one time in my yard, and terrific looks were given to us on the two sunflower feeding stations, as well as an every now and then visit to the berries.

Thirty-five (35) species were seen or heard during the program which ended with a few folks leaving around 11:00. I would have expected a few more species if the early morning fog was not present. Tomorrow's forecast is for a slightly cooler morning, and a more westerly breeze, which could help a bit.

Sunday, October 2nd - Weather 64F – 72F (Partly Cloudy) -Species Count: 40

This day started out without the fog of yesterday, and although the winds were still out of the southwest to west, there was a few things moving around early. Warblers were few and far between, however we did manage to squeeze out a BLACKBURNIAN WARBLER late in the program. High in the Sweet Gum, the bird gave us a decent look before heading out of the yard. The fall "yellowish" color was a treat to see. Thirteen warblers for the fall so far, which includes September. While the total number is respectable for my yard, the overall numbers aren't. In central North Carolina, we get our best numbers with a northwest wind, or a significant cold front, and so far this has not happened.

Right away a YELLOW-BILLED CUCKOO showed itself easily in the Birch, and everybody got a thrill of how cooperative it was. The group of Rose-breasted Grosbeaks were back again on the platform feeder as well as hitting the dogwoods on a semi-regular basis. High in the Poplar, a brownish bird was seen, with a striped head, and after careful observation, it was the first of the season's WHITE-THROATED SPARROW! Typical first fall birds are seen between October 5th through the 10th. This bird was a welcomed addition to the October yard list! Multiple White-eyed Vireos were present, with one being a juvenile bird. Early in the morning the BARRED OWL let me know he was present, and the Fish Crows were leaving the lake in search of food.

Thrush program cont.

Today the Gray-cheeked Thrush was very cooperative. It called numerous times, and was seen in multiple hardwoods really close. Everyone noticed the darker thrush, with no eye-ring, and we also got familiar with the somewhat high-pitched call. Swainson's (2), and one Wood Thrush rounded out the trifecta. Still the numbers are low, especially the Scarlet Tanagers. Only one was seen today.

A couple of Chimney Swifts were flying overhead, and we talked about the few remaining days they will be seen in Wake County. A couple of Indigo Buntings were heard flying overhead, which was nice. These cuties aren't seen regularly in my habitat.

Forty (40) species were seen or heard today, and the expectation is about the same for tomorrow. The need for a wind change to the northwest, and much cooler weather still exists. Numerous berries on the dogwoods still need to pop, and the Magnolia berries aren't red either.

Monday, October 3rd - Weather 62F – 77F (Partly Cloudy) - Species Count: 39

The new work week for some still brought us a southwesterly wind, and I was not expecting any major changes to the yard list. The common birds are here, and the thrushes are here in small numbers, but the tanagers and warblers are scarce. We again found the one Scarlet Tanager, and all three thrushes were present, but in one to two quantities. The Gray-cheeked Thrush was not very cooperative today, but some folks got a peek at it. The Wood and Swainson's were a little bit more cooperative. The group has affectionately renamed the program to the Rose-breasted Grosbeak program, because the now seven birds are still present. And hungry! A couple of the birds have the rose breast, and they pretty much hang out at the platform feeder in the front yard. Mid-morning gave the birders an increased influx of Northern Flickers flying around the yard. I see this woodpecker infrequently during the summer, however when the dogwood berries begin to ripen, their hearty appetite brings them into the dogwood berries. I'm still waiting for the first Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, but I guess it has to wait a couple of days. Mid-morning, I abruptly said to the group, "Listen!" The first RED-BREASTED NUTHATCH since 2012 has hit the neighborhood! I had seen the reports on the CBC listserv of a major influx of these wonderful nuthatches, and I was excited to hear my first of the season. We now had all three this morning! I immediately crossed my fingers for the Red-breasted to stay this fall and winter, and enjoy the various seeds and suet I provide.



Rose-breasted Grosbeaks by Brian Pendergraft

Thrush program cont.

Typically, around 10:00am or so, we wind down the “tree watching” and start to look up to the skies. Today a couple of us who stayed later saw an adult BALD EAGLE, and an OSPREY. The Osprey and Bald Eagle are both resident breeders in the spring/summer, but it always nice to add them to the thrush program’s bird list, because both are not seen that often from my yard. Falls Lake is surrounded by Core of Engineers and State Park land, and this keeps homes a considerable distance away from the lake. Right place and the right time in my yard for these flyover birds of prey.

Tuesday, October 4th - Weather 63F – 70F (Partly to Mostly Cloudy)- Species Count: 41

This morning’s program proved to be the best to date with everyone getting great looks at a Gray-cheeked Thrush. I saw two birds earlier in the morning in a dogwood next door to my property, so I was liking our chances to get good looks. Two birds are better than one! Two Wood Thrushes were calling early in the morning, and we found one very cooperative bird. Some folks got on the Swainson’s Thrush as well, but this thrush was a bit more difficult for some. The count of Swainson’s is typically 6-8 during the program, and that makes it very easy to get good looks at the bird. Now, with only one or two, this makes it a challenge.

The surprise of the morning was that the winds shifted to the NNE, and the birds were very active early in the morning. Warblers were still few and far between, however we did get a nice look at an adult male BLACK-THROATED GREEN WARBLER. A BLACK AND WHITE WARBLER also was seen, but that was about it for the warblers.

On the 4th day of October the first YELLOW-BELLIED SAPSUCKER hit the yard, and this made it feel a bit more like fall. Add the first “seen” Red-breasted Nuthatch of the fall, now we had our sights on a good morning.

The single Scarlet Tanager gave everyone an outstanding look. This bird always places a smile on the face of birders who participate in the program. Maybe not as stunning as the adult male in the spring, but still quite a treat. Two flycatchers were seen this morning. An EASTERN WOOD-PEWEE visited the front yard, and was often seen “fly-catching” around the hardwoods. An EASTERN PHOEBE visited the split rail fence, and photographs were taken of this cooperative little flycatcher. Another YELLOW-BILLED CUCKOO was seen today. This bird does in fact nest in the neighborhood, however it’s heard a lot more than seen. Secretive to start with, the bird usually stays high in the canopy of hardwoods, hidden by a large cluster of leaves.

Thrush program cont.

Wednesday, October 5th - Weather 61F – 66F (Mostly Cloudy - Breezy) Species Count: 44

I went outside a bit earlier this morning (5:45am), and although there was not much nocturnal calling happening overhead, I did hear the first bird of the morning shortly after 6:00. It was a Gray-cheeked Thrush. Soon after this, the Swainson's Thrushes (x3) started their whistle-like call. Two Wood Thrushes began to smack a few times as well. Was this a prelude of the day?

The winds were stronger this morning, but they were intermittent, so the weather was not too bad. The good news was that the winds were still out of the NNE. Cloudy conditions made it somewhat difficult to see colors, but the folks got on most things. A large group of the New Hope Audubon Society came this morning, and all of them were participating in the program for the first time. This was very exciting to me! A few needed the Gray-cheeked for a lifer! The day would not let them down.

There were five warblers seen today, which did include a nice Black and White and Magnolia. The program's warbler total ended up at nine, but it should have been twelve to thirteen. We need northwest winds!

The Red-breasted Nuthatch found the suet feeder in the front, and everybody was excited to see this little guy. Many had a new year bird. The Yellow-bellied Sapsucker was shy but seen by all, and at one time we had all the nuthatches close by. An ACADIAN FLYCATCHER was our only flycatcher of the day, but the first for the yard in October. I had this bird on my yard list for September, and it is probably the same bird.

Five species of thrushes is always a good thing, and everyone marveled at the beauty of the Wood Thrush. The warm reddish-brown above, and white with bold black spots below, make this bird one of the most handsome thrushes. The subtle differences in the Gray-cheeked and Swainson's were very obvious today. The Gray-cheeked is overall a darker bird, and has no eye-ring. The Swainson's has a buffy eye-ring, and is an overall a browner and lighter bird. All three were together at one time near the ground, and although it took a while this morning to get "life looks", everybody did see the star of the show! The Gray-cheeked Thrush once again hadn't let the program down. The numbers are still below normal, but the birds that are present were eventually cooperative each day.

The Scarlet Tanager number was still 1-2 birds, but I expect that to grow in the next week. The Rose-breasted Grosbeak number now swelled to at least a dozen birds! At one time there were eight grosbeaks on the platform feeder at one time. I actually put more food on the feeder to try and get them to leave the dogwoods alone for the

Thrush program cont.

thrushes. I would never say that I have too many grosbeaks, because they truly are a treat to have around. However, to have a dozen is getting a bit crazy. It kind of reminds me of two winters ago when I had almost 200 Pine Siskins. The good thing is, the grosbeaks will only be here through the middle of October!

A single White-eyed Vireo, and 2-3 Red-eyed Vireos rounded out the vireo total, still with no Philadelphia. A few have been seen locally, so I had hopes of one here. If a Philadelphia Vireo were to show up during the program, it would go to the top of the list! I've had two in the yard over the years. Two hummers still played tag in the backyard, and every now and then hit the feeders. The purple Salvia still has multiple blooms on it, and I have several locations of the plant. The Yellow-billed Cuckoo was present again today with awesome looks, and a second bird was found by a few birders. Both birds were seen abnormally low in the trees, and this made for an easy photo.

In conclusion: The program hosted 57 birders during the first five days, and the total species count ended up at 64. Additionally, I would also expect to get Cape May, Black-throated Blue, and Blackpoll warblers in October. And I still don't have my first Yellow-rumped Warbler for the season. So there are more birds to check off the monthly list. My all-time record for October is 72 species, and one would think I could easily beat that number with it only being the 5th. But it simply isn't quite that easy. The additional species number really starts to wind down once I see the Hermit Thrush arrive in the middle of October.



White-eyed Vireo by Tom Justice

It was an absolute joy and privilege to have everyone participate in the program again this year. I think most everyone left with a little more knowledge, and an increased enthusiasm for the thrushes. Although the overall numbers of birds are down so far, many birders know, it only takes one bird to make it a lifer. This program gives me the opportunity to work closely with good people, and share my knowledge and enthusiasm with the thrushes. It's a great feeling to have simple program like this one, that attracts birders from all across the state of North Carolina. Warblers are my favorite bird species, but the thrushes are not far behind. And my current habitat allows me to regularly see a thrush that can be difficult to find, and bring the birding community closer to them. I've already been asked again to be sure that I have another Gray-cheeked Thrush program in 2017, and if the desire is still there, then who knows, it may just happen again.

Future Meetings

Over the summer our Vice Presidents Eddie Owens and Anne Dayer have lined up some stellar speakers for the coming year. The following is a list of speakers and their topics:

November 28, 2016, John Gerwin

- **Topic:** There are Mountains Beyond Mountains

December, No Meeting

January 23, 2017, Ted Simmons

- **Topic:** The American Oystercatcher

February 27, 2017, Kent Fiala

- **Topic:** eBirding 101

March 27, 2017, Ashley Dayer

- **Topic:** Why Conservation Needs Social Science: Understanding Human Behavior

April 24, 2017, Dustin Foote

- **Topic:** Falconry: An Ancient Art in Modern Times

May 22, 2017, David and Judy Smith

- **Topic:** Pantanal: The Wonderful Wetland of Brazil

Officers of the Chapel Hill Bird Club

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Saturday Field Trips

Bob Rybczynski leads field trips for the Chapel Hill Bird Club. The trips are every Saturday, except during the summer, and leave at 7:30 a.m. from the Glen Lennox Shopping Center on Highway 54 in Chapel Hill