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Brown-headed Nuthatch by Doug Pratt

## Chapel Hill Bird Club Bulletin

February, 2017

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### Next Meeting

**Monday, February 27, 2017**

**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.

### February 27, 2017 Program eBirding 101

**Speaker: Kent Fiala**

What, you're still not using eBird? Visit us this month to hear Kent Fiala describe why and how you should get started. Kent will describe the value you can get out of eBird data online, even if you don't put in your own data. For those who are already eBirders, Kent will reveal the hidden world of the eBird reviewer, mistakes that you shouldn't make, and how to make checklists that are more valuable for scientific purposes. Kent Fiala can probably tell you something you didn't know, no matter how long you have been eBirding.

**About the Speaker:** Kent has been birding for more than 50 years, and has been a Wings over Water Wildlife Festival leader every year, from the very beginning (20 years ago). For over 10 years he has managed the Carolina Bird Club website:

<http://www.carolinabirdclub.org>

### Welcome New Members

Dawn Lloyd, Graham  
Terrie McDaniel, Chapel Hill  
Kathleen Snipes, Chapel Hill

### 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

## The Evolution of a Young Naturalist

by Vanessa Merritt

Editor's Note: When John Gerwin spoke to the CHBC meeting in December, he brought with him twin sisters Olivia and Vanessa Merritt. These sisters are Young Naturalists with Wake Audubon, under John's mentorship. I asked if they would be willing to write articles for our monthly newsletter explaining why they became young naturalists and chronicling some of their adventures along the way. The first article by Olivia appeared last month. What follows are Vanessa's observations. Thank you Vanessa and Olivia for sharing your adventures with our bird club!

As many amazing things in my life do, my birding experience began with a book. *A Backyard Guide to Birdwatching* by the National Audubon Society was the short, informative book that sucked me into the world of birds when I was thirteen years old. Post-book, I joined the Young Naturalists of Wake Audubon and became the trainee of one of the most wonderful people I've ever met, ornithologist and naturalist John Gerwin. He introduced me to bird banding, radio telemetry, bird egg identification, and a host of other fascinating things.

Flash-forward five years, and guess where I am? Waist-deep in salty lake water, chasing grebes in Huelva, Spain. I discovered the opportunity the previous afternoon while on a bird tour in Spain's largest national park, El Parque Nacional de Doñana. My tour guide had explained that Luis, an ornithologist of Doñana Park, takes volunteers to band grebes every Friday in the winter. She asked if I was interested, and I answered, "Of course!"

That was how I found myself waking up early on a Friday morning to join a group of twenty other grebe banding volunteers in Huelva. We gathered where hundreds of Eared Grebes (known as "Zampullín Cuellinegro" in Spain and "Black-necked Grebes" in the U.K.) were foraging in the small, man-made salt lakes of the industrial city.

Luis, a seventy-something bird guru with olive skin and a long white beard, led the group of volunteers to a salt lake containing approximately 150 Black-necked Grebes. I was instructed to take my hiking shoes off and put on used aquatic shoes. As other volunteers adjusted their battered aquatic shoes, I barraged one of the lead grebe-banders, Julio, with questions about the capture process and how banders collect age and sex data. He explained the reason that the group only bands in the winter: Eared Grebes molt all of their flight feathers at once during this period, and thus cannot fly during much of the cold



*Zampullín Cuellinegro*

## Young Naturalist continued

season. Grebe age is determined by eye color: butterscotch means a hatch year bird (a bird that was born this year), caramel-orange means a second year bird, and bright red means a bird is older than two years of age. Sex is more difficult and subjective because it depends on the size and shape of the bill. A proportionally longer, straighter bill signifies a male, and a stubbier, more curved bill means a female. How fascinating! By the time our conversation ended, it was time to capture the grebes.



*An adult female is on the left with her short, upturned bill while an adult male is on the right with his long, straight bill*

Next thing I knew, I was sloshing through salty water holding a three-and-a-half foot tall, 150-foot-long net with a weighted bottom. All of us volunteers were working our way through the water, slogging through mud that sometimes went halfway up my calves. Do you remember the aquatic shoes that I had put on? Let's just say they didn't work out so well. My left shoe was sucked off by the mud, and in order to not lose the shoe to the lake, I stuck my foot through the worn slit next to the zipper. So, I was now wearing my aquatic shoe as an anklet while my left foot stomped through the mud in a thin, once-white sock. My situation became even more laughable when I approached a small metal fence in the middle of the lake that everyone had to step over. I put my right foot over first, then flung my left foot and shoe-anklet out of the water to hoist it over the wire. It was pretty hilarious.

After forty-five minutes of trudging through mud and water, our group had succeeded in enclosing the Eared Grebes. There were some escapees, of course; the grebes that still had enough flight feathers to fly laboriously flapped away, while a few ingenious birds walked up onto the shore and waddled away. But the rest of the grebes were corralled into a thin passageway of wire mesh. Julio quickly told me to drop my section of net and come with him, "Venga, venga!" He led me to the end of the wire passageway, where there were two seasoned volunteers picking up the grebes and placing them in floating crates. I quickly joined in, and soon all of the Black-necked Grebes were in the enclosures.

## Young Naturalist continued



*The floating crates full of Eared Grebes*

The grebe-filled crates were loaded onto a truck and taken to a nearby banding station. I had long since abandoned my shoes and socks on the shore of the salt lake, so I walked barefoot to the station. After about fifteen minutes, everyone had gotten organized and we were ready to start the banding process.

There were two groups: one for unbanded Eared Grebes and another for grebes with bands (“recaptures”/“recaps” in the U.S., “retraps” in the U.K. and Europe). Luis has been leading volunteers in grebe-banding in Huelva for twenty years, and through that time he has seen the recap rate to be 60%. That means that 60% of the Eared Grebes that are banded by this group are recaptured! This contrasts with the songbird recap rate in the U.S., which my mentor John says is roughly 2%.

I worked with Julio and his team of five volunteers processing recap birds. My job was to take banded grebes out of a crate and hand them to Julio, who would say the band number, age, sex, and molt (new feathers or old feathers). He would pass the Eared Grebe to a man who would measure the length of the bird’s wing chord, and then the grebe would be weighed. The scribe, Susana, recorded all of the information on a data sheet. The processed bird was then passed to another volunteer who would take it to Luis. Luis would quickly take pictures and say the bird’s age, sex, and molt, then the grebe would be released back into the lake.



*My banding crew included Susana on the far left and Julio on the far right*

A few minutes into my work, Julio said that I could practice my grebe aging and sexing skills (of which I currently had none) and use what he had told me before to determine the age and sex of each grebe that I handed him. Thrilled, I studied the eyes and bill of the grebes that I handled, and gave each one to Julio with two estimates. The more Black-necked Grebes that I looked at, the harder it became to determine age and sex. There was so much variation, especially with the bills, that sometimes I didn’t know if a grebe was a male or female. Julio

## Young Naturalist continued

explained that sexing was made even more difficult due to geographic variation. Some of the Eared Grebes that spend their winters in Huelva come all the way from Russia, where grebe individuals average larger body sizes than those who breed in Huelva. So, the bills of a male from Spain and a female from Russia could be roughly the same size. Though this variation made it challenging, I got about 85% accuracy with both aging and sexing.



*Me and Olivia in Huelva*

When we were done processing all of the Eared Grebes, I was exhausted. I went to the nearby lake to rinse the mud and guano off my legs. But when I stepped onto the lake shore, my leg plunged into the water and I fell waist-deep into the lake! It turns out that the small, sand-like matter was bits of plant material floating on water, not sand on the lake shore. I started laughing hysterically as Julio and my twin sister Olivia came running at the sound of the enormous splash. I explained what happened, and we

all began laughing as I turned back into the water to rinse off. What a great ending to a marvelous experience. I was sad to say goodbye to Julio, whose company I really enjoyed, and to Luis, whose kindness allowed me to have such an incredible time.

From banding grebes in Spain to birding in North Carolina, the book that I read five years ago stays with me. The relationships I have built with nature and my fellow human beings are the result of a single text that opened my eyes to the birds living around us all.

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## Visit Sandy Creek Environmental Park, A Birding Hot Spot

Sandy Creek Park is located on the site of one of Durham's old sewage treatment plants. In the 1990's a Master Plan was written to create an environmental park on the site. In the early 2000's Durham Parks & Recreation put in restrooms and picnic facilities. Most of the recent improvements to the park are the result of grants that the park has received and the hard work of hundreds of volunteers.

Park web site: <http://www.sandycreekparkdurhamnc.com/>

List of birds seen in the park: <http://www.sandycreekparkdurhamnc.com/birds.html>

Slide show of birds of Sandy Creek: <http://www.sandycreekparkdurhamnc.com/sandy-creek-birds.html>

# 2016 Christmas Bird Count: Sightings and Commentary



Steve, Sebastian, and Peggy looking at a Sharp-shinned Hawk perched on the top of the snag in the background.

Photo by Tom Driscoll at Phillips Jr High School on Estes



This Red-shouldered Hawk appeared to have had an adequate Christmas dinner.

Photo by Jim Capel at Carolina North Forest



I thought I had seen something special when I saw this Blue-headed Vireo. But stopping for milk on the way home, I bumped into another birder who had participated in the count. "Yea, we got one of those too," he informed me.

Photo by Jim Capel at Carolina North Forest



Red-shouldered Hawk, Bolin Creek Drive  
Photo by David Smith



Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Coker Arboretum  
Photo by David Smith



Brown-headed Nuthatch, Maple Drive  
Photo by David Smith

# 2016 Christmas Bird Count: Sightings and Commentary

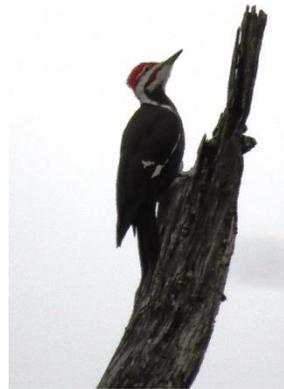


Northern Parula, Coker Arboretum  
Photo by David Smith

The Parula was a surprise, as they should have left for the Caribbean and southern Mexico by the end of October. According to Will Cook, this is only the second time a Northern Parula has been seen on a Chapel Hill Christmas Count.



White-throated Sparrow, Coker Arboretum  
Photo by David Smith



Turkey Vulture, Black Vulture, Pileated Woodpecker, Sandy Creek  
Photos by Kent Fiala

Brown Creeper, Duke Forest  
Photo by Kent Fiala



American Black Duck, Eastern Screech-Owl, Winter Wren, Red-breasted Nuthatch  
Photos by Jan Hansen

Will Cook created the count summary and pdf table of full results of the count which can be found at:

<http://chbc.carolinanature.com/chbc2016res.html>

Thanks Will!

## 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:

**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

### Elected Officers

**President:** David Smith  
([davidjudysmith@frontier.com](mailto:davidjudysmith@frontier.com))

**Co-Vice President:** Eddie Owens  
([banjoman\\_57@yahoo.com](mailto:banjoman_57@yahoo.com))

**Co-Vice President:** Anne Dayer  
([annedayer@gmail.com](mailto:annedayer@gmail.com))

**Treasurer:** Patricia Bailey  
([pbailey\\_489@yahoo.com](mailto:pbailey_489@yahoo.com))

**Secretary:** Vacant

### Appointed Officers

**Bird Count Supervisor/compiler:**  
Will Cook ([cwcook@duke.edu](mailto:cwcook@duke.edu))

**Field Trip Chairman:** Bob Rybczynski  
([rob.rybczy@gmail.com](mailto:rob.rybczy@gmail.com))

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