

# THE BULLETIN

## Chapel Hill Bird Club

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



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January 1999

### Monthly Meeting

Monday, January 25, 1999, at 7 pm

Program *Family Traditions in Song — the Stripe-backed Wrens of Venezuela*

Presented by Jordan Price of UNC-Chapel Hill

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

### January Meeting Program

by Ginger Travis

We've got a great talk lined up for Monday, Jan. 25 at 7pm: Jordan Price of the UNC-CH biology department will show slides illustrating his research on Stripe-backed Wrens of Venezuela, along with slides of other Venezuelan birds. Striped-backed Wrens are believed to be unique among known bird species in that males learn to call from their fathers; females learn from their mothers. Jordan, who did his graduate work with Haven Wiley, will talk about some of the possible reasons the wrens do things differently from other birds. Jordan also had a few adventures with other forms of wildlife, which he may talk about. (Hint: think large mammalian predators; think reptiles too.) See the accompanying article by elsewhere in this issue for more details.

The CHBC meets the fourth Monday of the month in the lounge of Binkley Baptist Church, located at the corner of Willow Drive and the 15-501 Bypass in Chapel Hill. All are welcome. You don't need to be a member to attend.

#### Coming up:

**February 22:** Joe Fisher, slide presentation on the ducks and geese of North America.

**March 22:** Harry LeGrand on techniques for monitoring bird populations (i.e., what, when, and how we count).

**September 27:** Mike Tove on Hawk ID.

### Field Trips

Saturday morning trips leave the Glen Lennox parking lot (on the north side of 54 just east of the intersection with 15-501 in Chapel Hill) at 7:30 am sharp

and return by noon. Reservations are not necessary. Beginners and visitors are welcome! Bring binoculars, boots (or old tennis shoes), a scope if you've got one, and be prepared for a hike. Contact Doug Shadwick (942-0479) for more details. Here's the tentative schedule (note the corrected dates):

Jan. 23 - Butner Gamelands - 'Sparrow Fields'

Jan. 30 - Local impoundments

Feb. 6 - Jordan Lake (south)

Feb. 12-14 - Coastal trip -Lake Mattamuskeet, Pamlico Sound, Hatteras, Pea Island

Feb. 20 - Western Orange County - Cane Creek

Feb. 27 - Falls Lake (south)

### The Call of the Wren: Moms Teach Daughters, Dads Teach Sons

by Mark Baumgartner, ABCNEWS.com (4/16/98)

Humans do it. Killer whales may do it. Now there's evidence that a South American wren also passes family traditions from one generation to the next. That's the striking discovery made by Jordan Price, a University of North Carolina doctoral candidate who endured five muggy, mosquito-infested rainy seasons on the Venezuelan savannah. Price found that male Stripe-backed Wrens learn calls exclusively from their fathers, while females learn calls only from their mothers—a sex-specific education never before found in birds. Songbirds typically learn their calls—used when confronting rivals over territory or finding a

### 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): \_\_\_\_\_

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mate—from unrelated neighbors, says ornithologist R. Haven Wiley, the pioneer of Stripe-backed Wren studies in Venezuela, who is Price's mentor. The mystery lies not only in these young birds learning specifically from their parents, but why female wrens don't learn calls from their fathers and why males don't learn from their mothers. The answer could lie in the birds' unusual social arrangement.

### *Cooperative Breeders*

Stripe-backed wrens are among a tiny minority of bird species that are cooperative breeders, living in family groups on communally defended territories. Within each group, the dominant male and female are the breeders while their offspring and siblings build and defend nests, waiting for their chance to ascend to breeding dominance. "Kind of like the British royal family," says Price, a native of Ontario, Canada. When a dominant stripe-backed male dies, a son or younger brother takes his place. When a dominant female dies, however, she's replaced by a female from outside the group. This tight circle of birds protects its territory, shunning all other outsiders. Anything learned comes directly from family members. Price's discovery is exciting, Wiley says, because it's one of the first examples of animals teaching family traditions.

### *A Whale of a Discovery*

"How to hunt is undoubtedly taught," he says. "In some primates, daughters learn from their mothers how to feed on termite mounds." Bird songs are learned, but scientists thought that most songbirds inherit the notes they use in defending territory, says Eugene Morton of the Smithsonian Institution. What Price discovered about the wrens has piqued the interest of scientists studying the more complex social patterns of killer whales. The orca's communication system is similar to the Stripe-backed Wren's and it has a similar family structure—but the birds are far easier to study.

### *Avoiding Incest?*

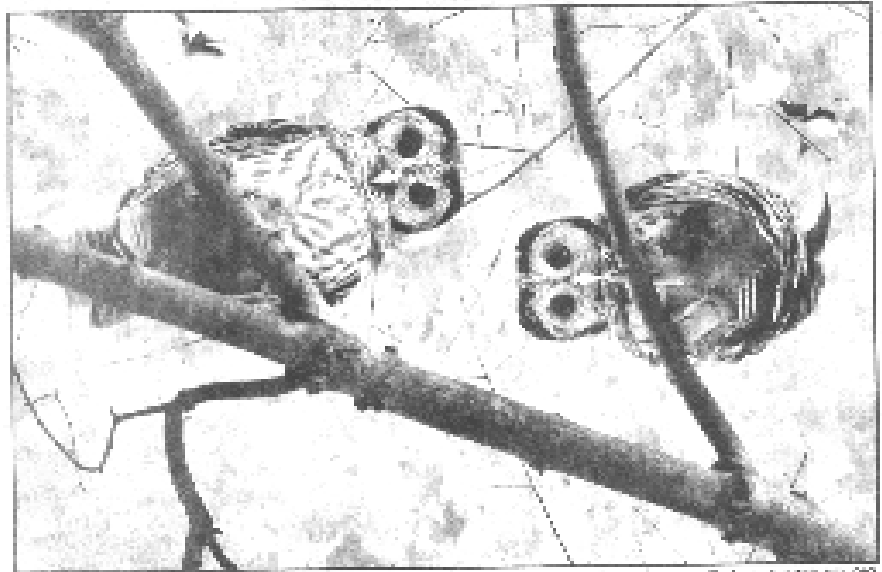
Sex-specific learning among Stripe-backed Wrens may have evolved, Price thinks, to prevent closely related birds from breeding with one another. But Wiley suggests, "it's much more likely to be important for group solidarity. It's how wrens keep track of their partner when engaged in a boundary encounter, sort of like football teams wearing different colored jerseys." The speckled black-and-gray stripe-backs are roughly 5 inches long and weigh about an ounce. They flit about in the acacias 30 feet above ground. One bird is indistinguishable from another, Price says, until it opens its beak and speaks. "When

I first heard the males, it reminded me of last names," because the families are so distinctive, says the 30-year-old Price. "They're bizarre calls, very precise. They sound like humans."

### *Where Are You?*

Wiley dubbed their calls "W.A.Y" because they sound to him like the birds are saying, "Where are you? Where are you?" "All males in a family have repertoires of about 12 calls that are totally identical," Price says. "We did playback experiments and they can't tell them apart, either." Price twice found two males living more than a half-mile apart that had nearly identical calls. "By looking at records from the 1970s," he says, "I discovered that they had the same paternal great-grandfather." Females, which are a lot quieter than males, tend to talk only when out of their territories, exploring, looking for breeding vacancies. The competition to replace dominant females is intense, says Price, who has watched as females, claws locked in combat, drop out of the sky and land at his feet. New bird calls may be music to our ears, but they can sure upset a neighborhood of Stripe-backed Wrens.

<http://abcnews.go.com/sections/science/DailyNews/wren980410.html>



### **UNC Barred Owls Are Back at McCorkle Place!**

Look for them near their usual nesting spot near the Davie Poplar.

### **Club officers**

*President:* Monica Nees (968-8549)  
*Vice President (CH):* Magnus Persmark (933-2255, emp34157@glaxo.com)  
*Vice President (Dur):* Ginger Travis (942-7746, Ginger.Travis@unc.edu)  
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