

# THE BULLETIN

## Chapel Hill Bird Club

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



Vol. XXIX, No. 3

March 2000

### Monthly Meeting

Monday, March 27, 2000, at 7:30 pm

Program — *Hummingbirds*, presented by Susan Campbell of the NC Museum of Natural Sciences

Location — Binkley Baptist Church, the Lounge. Binkley is on Willow Drive at 15-501 in Chapel Hill, near University Mall.

### Hummingbirds!

by Ginger Travis

Hummingbirds — they'll arrive any day now to spend the summer in NC, raise their young, then leave in Sept. for Mexico and Central America. But not all the Ruby-throateds go back. A few winter on our coast — and they are joined occasionally by individuals of such western species as Rufous. (Chapel Hill even had two wintering Rufous Hummingbirds this year.) Come learn more about North Carolina's summer and winter hummingbird populations from Susan Campbell, newly licensed hummingbird bander and educator at the NC Museum of Natural Sciences. As usual, at 7:15 p.m. we'll have refreshments and a quarter-hour social before our meeting begins. See you there!

#### Upcoming programs:

April 24 — R. Haven Wiley, UNC-CH biology professor, on the upcoming second annual Orange Co. mini-breeding bird survey, plus prospects of starting a mini breeding bird survey in Chatham Co.

May 24 — Scott Hartley on the ecology of Weymouth Woods - Sandhills Nature Preserve, where a population of Red-cockaded Woodpeckers is found (rescheduled from Jan. 24, the night the blizzard began).

### 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. Field trips are scheduled for March 25 and April 1, 8, and 15. No trips this spring afterwards because of bird counts. Destinations have not yet been set. Contact Doug Shadwick (942-0479) for more details.

### Yellow-nosed Albatross off Hatteras —

#### A Birding Moment to Remember

by Greg Miller, Hollywood, MD

February 5, 2000 Hatteras, North Carolina

Brian Patteson's team of leaders, clad in Grunden orange foul weather gear, cut up fish near the stern of the boat. The air was tinged with a fishy smell that was soon overcome by the diesel fumes from the idling motors of the Miss Hatteras. The cold, gusty winds whipped into our faces as we bantered loudly over the sound of wind and engines. The wetness of the ocean air seemed to sneak into the warmest of apparel and surprise the wearer with an unexpected shiver.

Several birders opted to stay in the warmth of the cabin as we motored out of Oden's Dock and headed into the gray-green waters of the winter Atlantic. The rest of us positioned ourselves around the perimeter of the boat as well as on the upper deck. The latter was my choice on this February 5 pelagic birding trip out of Hatteras, North Carolina.

As always, I was full of anticipation. One never knows what the day will hold. Birding at sea—pelagic birding—is a gambling birder's dream. It has more ups and downs than land birding. That is, there are less normal or average days. Good days can be

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

Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Telephone: (\_\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

really good and bad days can be really bad. All the best birding for an entire day can happen in the space of an hour or less. Birds on the open water are rarely if ever spaced out evenly. Food sources are concentrated in small areas and so are the birds. A boat can cover a large area of ocean in a day and never hit a good spot. And rarely, a pelagic trip will hit it rich. But this is exactly why birders head out into the ocean at all seasons and all sorts of weather.

My excitement increased as both Lesser Black-backed and Iceland Gulls joined the more common gulls and gannets at the back of the boat. Shortly, within the large groups of Bonaparte's Gulls, someone found an adult Little Gull which many of us got to see fly across the bow of the boat. A Razorbill took off the water 50 yards from us at the 3 o'clock position. Ahhh. Life is good!

The good birds were a distraction from the cold ocean air and the rocking motion of the boat. Suddenly, a cry rang out from the front of the boat.

"SKUA!!! GREAT SKUA!!!"

"Great Skua at one o'clock flying away above the horizon!" boomed the public address system on the boat.

One could see the commotion and feel the excitement as birders scrambled for positions along the starboard side of the boat.

"Where's the bird?"

"That way! Over there!"

"Where? I can't see it."

"Still flying away! Now at water-level!"

I could feel the engines rev as we picked up some speed, but the bird was now only a speck above the horizon. Other birders were gleefully high-fiving each other and exchanging huge "Lifer" grins. This was a new species for many on board who kept life lists--lists of species that they had seen and identified in their birding lives. The atmosphere on the boat was certainly a happy one, but many folks had only gotten fleeting views of a fly-away bird. All birders were hanging over the rails, searching for another skua and dreaming of killer views of this great, hulking bird.

The Great Skua is the bully pirate of the sea, harrassing other birds and causing them to drop their food. It's a bird with an apparent bad attitude. Skuas even pick on birds larger than themselves! It is a highly sought-after target on winter pelagics off the East Coast and today was no different. Many birders were aboard this boat with the intention of seeing a skua.

"SKUUUUUUAAAAAA!"

That didn't take long. Another bird was spotted at the 11 o'clock position flying much closer than the previous bird.

"ANOTHER SKUA AT 8 O'CLOCK!!! FOLKS, GET YOUR CAMERAS! THIS BIRD IS CLOSE!"

It was pure mayhem for the next few moments as birders scrambled through their packs and fumbled with film as the boat turned to gain a better vantage on the two skuas. Other birders jockeyed for position

along the railing to see not one, but two Great Skuas. Excited cries could be heard from all over the boat. What a treat!

I glassed the first skua with my binoculars. I quickly found the second bird. It was much closer than the first bird and was at 9 o'clock along the port side of the boat. This bird was fairly close to the water. The Miss Hatteras continued to turn to get a better view of the skuas.

On the water in the same view as the skua was something that filled my mind with a million thoughts in an instant. The waves and the rocking boat made for difficult viewing. Was it an albatross?!? I didn't dare let my mouth say the word. Any albatross in North Carolina waters was going to be a mega-rarity as there are no native albatrosses in the area. An albatross here might be thousands of miles out of place.

On a pelagic trip, it's easy to make a misidentification. But if you wait too long to ID it, others may not see it. If you misidentify it, you face a certain humbling experience. Still, it is better to get someone on a possibly good bird than to tell them about a positively good bird that's already gone and out of sight.

"It's probably a young Gannet" I cautioned myself with a great amount of restraint. "Why isn't it a Gannet?" I asked myself with effort. But inside I was churning. The bill was wrong and head shape didn't look right. It sat in the water differently, too. The combination of dark back and light head made a unique combination. If this bird was a Gannet, it would be a young bird.

Maybe 10 seconds had elapsed. Others were already snapping photos of Great Skuas. But my eyes were glued to the water. Suddenly the bird took flight. I groaned inside as it flew directly into the reflection of the bright sun. Although it hurt my eyes, I forced my eyes to remain open as it crossed the blinding light. The long-winged silhouette, however, was even more convincing than ever. As it neared the edge of the sunlit waters, the bird arced away providing me with a full ventral view of its white belly and underwings.

It was a sight I'll never forget as long as I live. The hair on the back of my neck stood straight up as I could feel the cold chill of lightning flash down my spine. Adrenaline rushed to my face and caused my cheeks to feel burned. My caution was gone now as I let out a blood-curdling scream.

AAAAAAL-BAAA-TROOOOOSSSSSSSS!!!!!!  
ALBATROSS!!! ALBATROSS!!!

More cries of albatross rippled through our ranks. The PA system crackled, "Yellow-nosed Albatross at 3 o'clock coming at the boat!" I heard people gasp as the boatload of stunned birders watched the bird come with several yards of the boat. Was I dreaming? All movement now was in slow motion and the sounds of the boat and people seemed to fade. The crowd. The cries. The cheers. All of it seemed muffled and distant as I watched the hallucination before me. It

was the albatross and I. We were alone. I watched in awe as this stiff-winged master of the air dipped one wingtip down and edged the gray waters. The bird raced through a trough created by the waves and then would rise slightly above the wave and catch the wind. Immediately the bird would effortlessly arc skyward and bank down again into another trough. It was simply unbelievable. It was music on the wing...

I could hear others around me. The word "Albatross" was being mentioned with almost reverent respect. It was a strange combination of some folks shouting and others almost whispering the name. albatross. Hoops and hollers came sporadically as the bird would make a pass at the boat. Others viewed the bird as if watching a ghost, as if it was some mystical aberration.

The clean white underwings were outlined by a thin brown edge. The underparts were white, too. Its back was uniformly brown and the white of the primary shafts were distinct near each wingtip. The bird seemed small for an albatross. It was roughly the same size as Northern Gannet, but had a shorter neck and longer wings. Its dark bill was slender for an albatross and the yellow line down the top of the upper mandible was dull yellow. The white head of the bird looked like it had been dipped into some dirty water as it was a pale ashy-gray. Long wings angling down on either side created the illusion of a giant 7-foot sickle as the great bird sailed toward the boat and then lit on the water. Chickug. Chickug. Chickug. Only cameras clicking off picture after picture interrupted the silence of the spellbound birders. The Miss Hatteras kept turning, attempting to angle in closer to the albatross. The bird picked up, flew around, and landed on the water several more times.

Finally, it seemed that everyone let down their guard simultaneously. The crowd of birders exhaled. Yes. It was as if we had all been holding our breath the whole time the bird was present. And just as quickly as the bird had appeared, it disappeared without a trace. No one knows exactly where it went or which direction it left. It was magical anyway, wasn't it?

The skuas were long gone, but a lone Glaucous Gull had appeared at the stern of the boat. Black-legged Kittiwakes, Northern Fulmars, and Red Phalaropes made a show later and further delighted a very happy bunch of people. Amazingly, I found myself feeling very tired after seeing the albatross and even weak in the knees. I never regained my composure. I felt both happy and yet shaken by the event. The encounter with a bird from afar had left me drained of strength. It was also a very soul-satisfying experience for me.

I will search again for another enriching moment. Another experience. Another encounter. Another bird. The travels. The journeys. The hunt. The shared joy of a find with other birders. The enthrallment of watching something wild and untamed and oh, so unpredictable. Ahh. That is birding!

## Field Trip Reports

### 2/27: Red Crossbills and Early Martin at Jordan

by Will Cook

I did a little birding at Jordan Lake the morning of February 27. The highlight was finally finding the Big Woods Road flock of Red Crossbills, which hadn't been reported since Jan. 24. At 11 am I found a flock of about 10, mostly males. I first noticed them because of their call notes, which were reminiscent of the bubbly call of Carolina Wren. Interestingly, they weren't feeding on pine cones, but seemed to be gleaning the bark of various deciduous trees. A Purple Finch nearby was eating Red Maple flowers, but the crossbills didn't touch them.

The location is close to where they'd been reported before. To get to the general area follow Ron Silverman's directions (from Jan. 9): "The specific location is 1.6 miles north of US 64 on Big Woods Road. On the right hand side (east) there is a small gravel pull-off area. There is a gate with small yellow signs marked State Park. You can walk around the gate and follow a path adjacent to a fence which runs along the north side of this forest area. The crossbills were seen about a 100 yards down the path." To get to the area where the flock was this morning, walk past the gate as above, but then go through the gate on the right (just before the deer carcass on the fence), and walk through the sewage field, paralleling Big Woods Road. After a couple of hundred yards you'll see a gravel road, which leads to the sewage plant if you go left or to a dead end if you go right. The crossbills were in deciduous trees shortly before you reach the gravel road.

By the way, the sewage plant and field are part of the Parker's Creek State Recreation Area. You can also reach the plant by entering the main gate on US 64 and following the main road until you see the plant on your left. There was one lonely Bufflehead on the sewage ponds this morning.

Other highlights: 35 Green-winged Teal at Farrington Rd causeway, 1 male Purple Martin atop the Farrington Road martin houses (just slightly early), 1 Loggerhead Shrike at the NCDNR HQ on Big Woods Road (seriously rare bird at Jordan, perhaps attracted by the smoldering remnants of a controlled burn). No P-s Flycatcher. Not much at Ebenezer, except for hundreds of gulls — I only found Ring-billed and Bonaparte's. No Osprey or Tree Swallows yet.

Butterflies: 2 Question Marks, 1 Mourning Cloak.

### 3/8: GBH Nests at Greenview

by John Argentati

As of March 8 we have now two Great Blue Heron nests at Greenview Pond [near Lake Wheeler, Raleigh]. Yesterday morning I saw six herons in the trees around the beaver pond. Perhaps they'll build even more. If you'd like to see some herons building nests, you should definitely check it out.

We also have a pair of Tundra Swans on Greenview with 6-8 more over at Lake Wheeler. Recently I've also seen a big Cooper's Hawk, three Hooded Mergansers, lots of Green-winged Teal, Wood Ducks, our resident Red-tails, White-throated Sparrows, meadowlarks, bluebirds, lots of Killdeer. I was hearing Woodcock but haven't been hearing them lately.

**3/11: Knap of Reeds trip and a few yard birds**

by Josh Rose

Will Cook led a CHBC trip to Knap of Reeds Creek (on Old Oxford Hwy across from the Federal Penitentiary in Butner) on Saturday morning, March 11. Tom Krakauer must have arrived first, he pished up some White-crowned Sparrows near the gravel parking area. I arrived last, saw no one, and almost left before I spotted birders up Old Oxford Highway a ways.

I caught up with the group just as they were leaving the roadside to walk a sorta-paved path between the large cleared area and the thin strip of roadside woods. Pretty quiet walk along this stretch, mostly innumerable Towhees. We discovered a Black Rat Snake sunning itself on what appeared to be a discarded car seat; Tom pulled the snake back out when it fled for cover, giving us all a better look. On our way back, the sun heated up and vultures, including a Black, started soaring.

Next we walked the gravel road along the impoundments. Several Great Blue Herons took flight from the heronry as we came into viewing range, but others stayed at their nests, so hopefully we didn't disturb them too much. A flock of Rusty Blackbirds and a Red-headed Woodpecker also turned up here. An unfortunate Bowfin (a fish) appeared to be stranded in a drying pool of water. As the road continued into the woods, we encountered a Blue-Gray Gnatcatcher, another flock of Rusties, a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, several pairs of Wood Ducks, and on the way back out a Pileated Woodpecker and a Painted Turtle crossing the road. We also came across the first odonate of the spring, a damselfly which I think was a Variable Dancer (*Argia fumipennis*).

Part of the group left at this point, but the rest of us hiked in on a sewer access road that ran along the opposite side of the creek. It was a little smelly, and not the nicest walk thanks to the tire treads of some kind of heavy equipment that had torn the ground into a muddy ruin. However, this side of the creek was much shadier and lined with wildflowers and frogs (all Chorus Frogs, I think). We had another look at the Great Blue Heronry, and also a pond which was populated with lots of waterfowl including Ring-necked Ducks, Northern Shoveler, Green-winged Teal, and Canada Geese. We also encountered three more Black Rat Snakes! Butterflies were in evidence as well, nearly all Falcate Orangetips but also one Spring Azure and a few anglewings of some sorts.

Meanwhile, back in the yard, the Purple Finch flock is at 14 birds and counting today, and a Fox Sparrow is still around. My personal harbinger of spring is that the American Goldfinches are shedding their subdued winter colors for the bright yellow and sharp black of breeding plumage. A Brown Creeper was actually singing outside my window Friday morning, but has not visited the suet feeder for a week or so. The Duke Forest Barred Owls, meanwhile, have shed all pretense of nocturnality and are hooting at all hours of the day and night lately.

**Sightings**

- Eared Grebe (1) - 2/29/00 - Ebenezer Point, Jordan Lake - Doug Shadwick
- Green-winged Teal (35) - 2/27/00 - Farrington Rd causeway, Jordan Lake - Will Cook
- N. Shoveler (2) - 3/11/00 - Knap of Reeds, Granville Co., CHBC
- Red-breasted Merganser (6) - 2/29/00 - Ebenezer Point, Jordan Lake - Doug Shadwick
- Loggerhead Shrike (1) - 2/27/00 - NC Division of Forest Resources HQ, Big Woods Rd, Jordan Lake - Will Cook
- Fish Crow (1) - 2/26/00 - Sharon Rd, Chapel Hill - Will Cook
- Purple Martin (1 male) - 2/27/00 - Farrington Road, Chatham Co. - Will Cook
- Red Crossbill (10) - 2/27/00 - Parker's Creek sewage field off Big Woods Road, near Jordan Lake - Will Cook
- Common Redpoll (1) - 2/20/00 - Anderson St., Durham - Cathy Claerr. The same or another C. Redpoll was reportedly in Durham on 2/19/00 (fide Ted Zoller).
- Osprey (1) - 2/27/00 - W. Point on the Eno, Durham Co., Jim Bloor
- Osprey (1) - 2/28/00 - Little Cr impoundment, Durham Co., Marsha Stephens

**Club officers**

- President: Magnus Persmark (933-2255, emp34157@glaxowellcome.com)
- Vice President (CH): Ginger Travis (942-7746, Ginger\_Travis@unc.edu)
- Secretary: Judy Murray (942-2985, jmurray.uncson@mhs.unc.edu)
- Treasurer: Fran Hommersand (967-1745)
- Field Trip Chairman: Doug Shadwick (942-0479)
- Publicity Chairman: Ginger Travis (942-7746, Ginger.Travis@unc.edu)
- Bulletin Editor: Will Cook (967-5446, cwcook@duke.edu)
- http://www.duke.edu/~cwcook/chbc

3/17/2000

**CALVIN AND HOBBS**



ALTHOUGH SMALL, HE PUTS OUT TREMENDOUS ENERGY. TO HOVER, HIS WINGS BEAT HUNDREDS OF TIMES EACH SECOND!

