

Okatibbee Creek Audubon Society

May 2002

Inside this Newsletter

Some May Birding
Highlights

*The Red-Cockaded
Woodpecker*

May Meeting Details

Some May Birding Highlights

by Joseph McGee

Spring migration winds down in East Central Mississippi by mid-May and by the end of the month is largely over. However, there is bird activity aplenty throughout the month as breeding activity reaches a near frenzy with many species building nests, incubating eggs and fledging young.

One spring transient to watch for in early May is the Common Nighthawk. Look for them just before and right at dusk as they fly silently overhead. They also breed in our area. Meridian once had a sizable population of nighthawks nesting right on the rooftops of downtown buildings in summer; their numbers seem down in recent years.

After the late April-early May lull in hummingbirds (early spring hummers are mostly transients migrating north), Ruby-throated Hummingbird numbers will pick up again around Mother's Day, and hummingbirds will appear in large numbers at well-maintained feeders and in humming-bird gardens throughout the summer and until early October.

While in the woods, listen for the calls and songs of our breeding summer residents.

By mid-month feisty Eastern Wood-Pewee males will be marking their territories with song--a sweet, plaintive "pee-wee, pee-a-whee," as will Acadian Flycatchers with their loud, explosive "peet'-see" (or "PIZ-za!") and other unmelodious vocalizations. You may hear the loud "weep" and coach's whistle trill of Great Crested Flycatchers in open woodlands and even in older, residential areas of Meridian where huge, old trees abound in dooryards and along streets. (Try the Magnolia Cemetery area or your own neighborhood!)

Another member of the flycatcher family easily observed nest-building and in other activities in open, tree-dotted country is the Eastern Kingbird. A pair of Kingbirds is fiercely territorial! It wouldn't be summer in Mississippi without Eastern Kingbirds laying claim to the land!

Back in the woods listen for the ethereal song of the Wood Thrush, perhaps the most beautiful of all our bird songs. When alarmed, Wood Thrushes also produce a loud, unmusical vocalization--a rapid series of "electric spark" popping sounds which carry well.

By late April or early May, many of our "yard birds" will have fledged their first brood. By that time we'll all have had baby Carolina Wrens, Northern Mockingbirds, Brown Thrashers or Eastern Bluebirds all over the yard. Hopefully, most feline/baby bird encounters will have been avoided!

One of the most enjoyable experiences a birdwatcher can have in May is to discover a big, old red mulberry tree loaded

with ripe fruit and feasting birds. A mature mulberry may host dozens of Gray Catbirds, Northern Mockingbirds, Brown Thrashers, American Robins, late Cedar Waxwings (note the last date you see a Cedar Waxwing in spring!), even Eastern Bluebirds and sometimes late Rose-breasted Grosbeaks.

If you are really lucky in early May, you may spot a singing Golden-winged Warbler in an overgrown woodland or thicket. Other hard-to-spot warblers which may put in an appearance in early May include Chestnut-sided (look high or low), Black-throated Green (look high), Bay-breasted (usually high), and Blackpoll, one of the latest of the wood warbler transients to put in a spring appearance (look for it high in the treetops). The males of these species will all be in bright, alternate plumage and may well be singing.

Perhaps the easiest spring transient warbler to spot is the Yellow. Both males and females give loud chip notes, and males often sing in spring as they pass through. Yellow Warblers can often be seen as late as early June. Look for them in willows, river birches and streamside thickets.

Another fairly easy-to-spot-in-May (with some patience!) transient warbler is the Magnolia Warbler. The males are a knockout in breeding plumage--when you get your first good look at one, you can hardly believe it's real! The song is soft and usually difficult to hear.

In swampy woods and other woodlands near water, listen for the plain "tweet, tweet, tweet, tweet" (or "cheep, cheep, cheep, cheep") song of the Prothonotary Warbler; the mundane song belies the beauty of the songster. The grayish-blue and intense yellow plumage of the Prothonotary make it one of North America's most spectacular warblers.

Don't let another May pass without learning the soft, flute-like song of the Hooded Warbler, or the seemingly "tired" chirp, chirp, chirp of the Kentucky Warbler. These two summer residents rival the Prothonotary in beauty, and all three have loud, insistent chip (alarm) notes.

In brushy woods look and listen for Yellow-breasted Chats (chatting, of course!) and also for White-eyed Vireos singing their loud "chip-flew- out-of-the-white-oak" song. White-eyeds have a wide and varied repertoire; one of their utterances sounds like one of the "chuck" notes of the Summer Tanager.

Speaking of which, in drier, open woods (especially pine-oak woodlands) listen for the "tucky, tuck, tuck" of Summer Tanager as well as their robin-like song.

Should you find yourself in farm country in May, check out large, uncut hay fields for Bobolinks and Dickcissels among the Red-winged Blackbirds and Eastern Meadowlarks. Bobolinks sometimes appear in large flocks of a hundred or more birds, though a flock of several dozen is more likely in our area. Once you learn the long, bubbling song of the Bobolink, you'll be able to locate them far and wide! They are transients headed north.

Some of the Dickcissels are just passing through, too, but a few remain to breed in East Central Mississippi. Or, at least, they attempt to nest. Often, the hayfields are cut just as the males define their territories (through song, which their name mimics) or just as nesting begins.

The "fly in the May birding ointment" is the ubiquitous Brown-headed Cowbird. Everywhere you go, it seems, you encounter male cowbirds courting female cowbirds, who, in turn, spend the early morning hours seeking out vulnerable (i.e., temporarily vacated) nests of other species in which to lay their eggs. Interesting biology but disastrous for many of our songbirds!

May Meeting

Joe McGee

Bruce Reid, bird conservation director for Mississippi Audubon, and Tommy Shropshire, formerly with the state Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks, will present Okatibbee Creek Audubon's next program on May 13. Their program will be "Audubon's Important Bird Areas of Mississippi."

The IBA project is a worldwide effort which seeks to identify and in some way protect key bird habitats. Such habitats are critical to birds on their annual migrations as well as during their breeding season and also as feeding areas.

Bruce Reid is a former writer for daily newspapers in Maryland, Virginia, and Mississippi, where he wrote on environmental topics for The Clarion-Ledger.

Tommy Shropshire is a private consultant hired by Audubon to work on the IBA project. He is a former assistant director of the Museum of Natural Science in Jackson.

For more details on the IBA project, see the Winter, 2001, issue of Mississippi Audubon.

Our meeting begins at 7:00 p.m. at the EMEPA Building on Highway 39 North in Meridian. See you there!

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OCAS Officers

R. L. Richardson.....President
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Joseph McGee.....Field Trip Chairperson
Ruth Ann Rosamond....Refreshments Coordinator

Riparian Conservation News

Are you interested in the conservation of Mississippi's streams, creeks and rivers? If so, you may be interested in the state Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks Department's "Scenic Streams Stewardship Program." The coordinator for the program is Andrew Whitehurst.

Recently, the Chunky Creek and River in Newton County were found eligible for the program on request of Everett Robinson of Newton. Everett is area manager for Mississippi Power which has adopted the Chunky in the Adopt-a-Stream program sponsored by the Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality and the Mississippi Wildlife Federation.

For more information on the Mississippi Scenic Stream Stewardship Program, contact Andrew Whitehurst, **Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks**, Mississippi Museum of Natural Science, 2148 Riverside Drive, Jackson, MS 39202-1353.

Andrew's e-mail address is <andrew.whitehurst@mmns.state.ms.us>

www.mdwfp.com/scenicstreams/index.html

You might want to request being put on the mailing list to receive the Mississippi Stream Stewardship Quarterly.

---*Joe*

On the Trail of the Red-Cockaded Woodpecker

by Lauren Thead

A cool wind blowing in from Bluff Lake gave a suggestion to me that it might start to rain, which would cause me to end my search for the elusive Red-cockaded Woodpecker at Noxubee National Wildlife Refuge, one of the few places in Mississippi where this endangered bird can be found.

The Red-cockaded Woodpecker's extremely specialized habitat requirements are the reason for its endangered status. It needs open, mature pine forest for foraging and drills a nest hole only in a large, living pine afflicted with heartwood disease. Pine sap oozing from small holes that it drills around the nest site may help to repel predators.

The Red-cockaded Woodpecker is a medium-sized woodpecker with a black-and-white barred back, a black cap, and white cheek patches. The red tufts or "cockades" on the male are usually invisible in the field; its overall black-and-white coloration makes it very difficult to locate in the tops of trees, where it often forages.

That's where I found it at last, lightly tapping and working its way around the trunk of a tall old pine. A few others were also nearby. I watched them tap and call to each other until one of them spread its wings in an interesting display and flew off.

The Red-cockaded Woodpecker is not an easily-observed backyard- feeder bird. It is tough to find and follow with your binoculars, but its behavior is fascinating to watch, if you can locate it. And observing the behavior of birds around you is one of the best ways to improve your skills and have a better understanding of the natural world.

OOPS!

Try, try again! We tried to arrange a field trip to one of a couple of neat places on May 11, but it seemed that over half of us had conflicts around that time. Burnside Park north of Philadelphia has been suggested as a possible destination, and Joe has another in mind, too. Comments?

Spring Bird Banding

The weather was everything you could hope for on the coast--warm, mostly sunny, with a stout breeze bringing in a tang of ocean to the pavilion pitched on scrubby inland territory. The scientists were beginning to look a little sour, a little frazzled, with good reason: they'd been up since before dawn, trudging through sandy thickets to check for night birds that might have found their way into the mist nets hung throughout the testing area. By 10:00 everybody could've used a couple of pots of strong coffee.

The regular banders were there along with some guests specially invited to participate: a couple from Great Britain whose accents fascinated the children (and probably some adults); an ornithologist from Maryland who was able to mesmerize several birds into calmness by looking and cooing at them; a writer for *Smithsonian* who categorized all birds as either "hawks, or hawk food." Nobody had to ask what his favorite bird was.

Bob Sargent, wearing a giant apron with the words "Chief Hummer" embroidered on the bib, guided the group, watching as other scientists checked tail coverts on a warbler, darting away from the tent when somebody spotted an interesting bird high in the sky safe from the mist nets, even untangling and bringing in--with his bare hands--a cotton-mouth moccasin to admire and show to the crowd of tourists assembled nearby. The tourists backed swiftly away. Bob told the children present that they were to respect the snake, then pointed out the beauty of the scale pattern on its belly. He took it later to the other side of the peninsula and released it.

How to talk about the whole Ft. Morgan experience? The list of all caught, documented and released birds would be too long to write here. Nor is there an adequate way to describe the camaraderie of the group. I could tell you that a Cattle Egret was snared in the nets (a somewhat unusual event, considering the size of the bird); that the hummingbirds were banded with rings so tiny you marveled at the precision of the scientists as they handled the delicate little creatures' legs; that those large humans gently cradled especially tired-looking migrants in their hands and fed them sugar water from eye

droppers to give them a little boost for their continuing journey after they were released. But all those details would still insufficiently describe the two weeks when everything focuses on the denizens of the sky passing over that little slice of land between Bay and Gulf.

Instead, go there yourself in April or October, hang out with the group as much as you have time to, observe the seriousness of their scientific effort even as they banter cheerfully with each other. Wonder at the odd wistfulness in your heart as you cup a Blue Grosbeak and then raise your hand to watch it swiftly wing away from you. Then eat a picnic lunch in the open sea air at the Ft. Morgan historic site and maybe you'll be as lucky as we were, and will glance up into the softly-moving pines right over your head and see a nighthawk huddled into a nap against the heat of a coastal afternoon.

--Sheila Thead

For your information

If you have e-mail, but you got only this paper copy and prefer to get the newsletter electronically, please send me a message so that I can put you into the OCAS group e-mail list. <sthead@mississippi.net> And please let an officer, those who do this newsletter, or Lauren Thead know of upcoming events of interest to OCAS. We'd all appreciate more activities to look forward to.

Robert Garvin returns! By popular demand Robert Garvin of Newton will be back to present our June program. Robert's program will be a slide show of the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge in New Mexico.



Kids may like these websites. (Adults may, too!)

www.enature.com

<http://gulfinfo.com/ditown/audmain.htm>

www.mdwfp.com/museum

<http://rainwater.astronomers.org/info>

www.law.ou.edu/hist (This site has scanned- in copies of original historical documents.)