

Okatibbee Creek Audubon Society

April 2004

Inside This Newsletter...
Events & Sightings
April Program
The Return of Spring
They're Back! (Barred Owls, That Is)
Into the Woods....

Read OCAS' newsletter online at <http://mywebpages.comcast.net/ocas>

If you're reading this online or by e-mail and know of someone who'd like to get the newsletter electronically to save postage. sthead@mississippi.net

Note from Rich Richardson: Meetings are held at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Meridian. Trinity is located at 4223 Poplar Springs Drive. Please use the SOUTH driveway on the church property (the one nearer downtown Meridian) and proceed around through the parking lot to the back, where you may enter the building through the double doors. 7:00 p.m. every second Monday of the month. Refreshments for the April 12th meeting: Sheila and Lauren Thead. **Needed:** Someone for May and June.

Sightings

Submitted by our members

By **Ed Brown**: All on 3/14/2004. Yellow-Crowned Night Heron. F.S. Road 504-0, southwest corner of management area--Jasper County, MS. Northern Pintail Ducks. Harris Field Smith County Road / F.S. Road 517 next to management area in Smith County. Wood Ducks on Tallahala Creek, Morton/Marathon Road, Jasper County Road #24 Jasper County.

3/15/2004. Pied-billed Grebes on Pineview Lake Highway #15 south of Louin in Jasper County.

By **Nancy Donald**: 2/8 Forster's Tern. Gin Creek, Okatibbee Reservoir.

By **Lomax and Ruth Ann Rosamond**: Friday, 3/19. Our first hummingbird of the season. And a Brown Thrasher!

By **Howard Malone**: 3/26 Eastern Phoebe. Some may remember my article last spring of the unsuccessful nesting attempt of the Eastern Phoebe on the back porch of my now unoccupied birth place. Last week I saw the bird leaving the porch and began to investigate. In the corner of the porch under a wire perch was a generous pile of bird droppings, perhaps indicating that the bird may have spent the winter there. Coincidentally, I received the NAS pocket Guide on songbirds from my granddaughter and found that the Eastern Phoebe "regularly re-uses the same nest." I was glad then that I had not removed the existing nest for a show-and-tell at the OCAS meeting. I began watching the nest and on the 26th noted tail feathers above the rim of the nest, which is tucked just under the exposed roof on a pair of electrical wires. Now, if this attempt is successful, I will be elated.

Special information from **Debra King**: 4/1/04 6:27 PM: the martins are late to roost. Now I know why: they must know that as they circle above to line up with their gourd, a hawk awaits...he swoops and right before my eyes a big hawk grabs one off the gourd...my mouth wide open, I followed it to a pine tree, just a silhouette now. The martin isn't struggling. I couldn't tear my eyes away! But thank goodness, he flew off with its prey and I wasn't forced to watch the rest...for I'm sure I would have. One martin will be sleeping alone tonight.

By **Lauren Thead**: 3/6/04 350+ Double-crested Cormorants, American Bald Eagle, Barn Swallow. Noxubee National Wildlife Refuge.

3/11 Cooper's Hawk, Yellow-crowned Night-heron. Magnolia Drive, Macon, MS.

3/18 Osprey, 2 Seaside Sparrows, Gray Catbird. Gulf Shores, AL.

3/19 Blue-winged Teal, Black-necked Stilt, Prothonotary Warbler, Pig Frog. Dauphin Island, AL.

3/23 Three Yellow-crowned Night-herons, Northern Rough-winged Swallow, Yellow-throated Warbler. NNWR.

3/25 Blue-gray Gnatcatcher. Gray Center Earth Lab, Canton, MS.

4/5 Green Heron, Little Blue Herons, Snowy Egrets, Blue-winged Teal, Yellow-throated Vireo, Prothonotary Warbler, Common Yellowthroat. NNWR.

Events

Spring Banding at Fort Morgan, Alabama. April 3-17, 2004. A flood of Neotropical Migrants in their finest breeding plumage! Don't miss it. (Editor's note: There are camping and lodging facilities at **Gulf State Park, Gulf Shores, AL** [1-800-252-7275, or 1-800-ALA-PARK], numerous motels there in town, and facilities at **Dauphin Island, AL**, across the pass from Fort Morgan [toll-free 1-877-532-8744]. You can always catch the ferry to Fort Morgan if you stay at Dauphin Island. See websites below.)

<http://dauphinisland.cc/>

http://www.dcnr.state.al.us/parks/gulf_1a.html

<http://www.al.com/parks/north.html>

Newton County Horticulture Clinic. The Newton County Horticulture/Gardening Clinic is scheduled for April 14th. A registration cost of \$2 covers admission to the clinic and mid-morning refreshments. All registration fees should be sent to the Newton County Extension Office at P.O. Box 188, Decatur, MS 39327. Checks should be made payable to MSU 4-H and should arrive at the Extension Office no later than April the 8th! Registration for the clinic will begin at 8:30 AM and the program will begin promptly at 8:50. The clinic will conclude at 12:30 PM. For more information, call: 774-5429.

Frogwatch. Anyone interested in joining a sort of “citizen science”, long-running project aimed at surveying and protecting our frog and toad populations, visit the following website and sign up.

<http://www.frogwatch.org/>

National Geographic article. This month (that is, in April’s issue) there is a beautiful photographic piece on cranes of the world, with some text accompanying the pictures. (I was disappointed, however, with the omission of the Mississippi Sandhill Crane from the article.) There is also a double-sided map showing the migration routes of birds in the Western **and** Eastern Hemispheres! If you have (as I do) a **NG** collection going back past the 50’s, you’re going to pause a while before shelving this particular issue; and if you don’t have a subscription to the magazine, it might be a good idea to splurge and buy a copy this month.

Gautier Birding and Nature Festival When: 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. May 6. Where: Mississippi Sandhill Crane and National Wildlife Refuge, off Gautier-Vancleave Road. The festival in Gautier is one of a three-day regional birding event that includes programs in Moss Point on May 7 and Lucedale on May 8. Contact City Manager Don Pickard, Gautier City Hall, 497-8000

Weeklong nature camp planned in June for Mississippi students

Strawberry Plains Audubon Center will host a weeklong camp this summer for Mississippi students interested in all aspects of nature study. Topics of study include birds, other wildlife, native plants, insects, scientific survey techniques and journal writing. Participants will enjoy a full day of activities each day, including nature walks, programs on endangered species, study of various native habitats at the 2,500-acre center, nightly campfires, and movies on nature. The camp will be June 13-18. It is designed for two age groups: 10-12 and 13-15. Space is limited to 10 students per age group. Housing will be provided at the center near Holly Springs. Strawberry Plains will be accepting nominations for students who wish to participate in this camp until June 1. For more information, contact Mark Renick, Strawberry Plains Audubon Center Director of Education, at 662-252-1155 or by email at <mailto:mrenick@audubon.org>.

From Jerry Bird of Bay St. Louis: Just after sundown, I have been watching the Doppler radar from Mobile and New Orleans and it appears that there are birds coming in to the coast. Try this link <http://weather.noaa.gov/radar/national.html> and click on either the dot for Mobile or new Orleans to see the latest scan. By clicking on loop, you can get a time series of the previous few updates and actually see the birds coming into the coast. One thing that shows up is the increased activity along the rivers such as the Pascagoula and Pearl. I have no idea how many birds are actually coming in but with the time loop you can see a progression from south to north.

Remember, articles, bird sightings and items of interest are requested for the newsletter! Next deadline: **April 7.**

April Program

By Brant Cunningham

Spring has sprung and life abounds. Nature is bursting out everywhere with new blooms and bright colors (not to mention all of the pollen). Birds and other wildlife are enjoying the bounty of all this new life, as these are the days of plenty in the natural world. This grand play within nature is the premise for our April program. The program consists of pictures and commentary about spring foliage and birds. The first part of the program will deal with some spring ephemerals that are considered rare or uncommon. The second part deals with native foliage that benefit wildlife. And last but not least, a list of a few birds that are available for viewing in our area. I would like to encourage everyone who has an interest in nature's spectacular show to attend the April meeting. After all, to any self-respecting nature lover, this is the most wonderful time of the year!

The Return of Spring

By Ed Brown, Area Forester
Mississippi Forestry Commission

The return of spring is a time of year welcomed by all people and all living things. It is the beginning of the circle of life on earth for another year. Springtime is an awakening from the deep slumber of winter's cold grip.

The welcomed lengthening of the day and its warm temperatures are another sign of the return of spring. It is a very exciting time of year for fellow birdwatchers, outdoorsmen and fishermen alike.

This morning, March 7, 2004, I would like to express the enjoyment of seeing the return of spring. I would also like to inform all outdoors people and birdwatchers alike of the opportunity our National Forests and Wildlife Management Areas in Mississippi have to offer to see the return of spring. This morning was a very exciting one for me. This will be the second day in March 2004 the sun will shine all day. Very exciting, since it has rained nearly all of February. I arose to the sound of my alarm clock at 5:00 a.m. I got ready to enjoy a morning of birdwatching at the Bienville National Forest and the Tallahala Wildlife Management Area. The Tallahala National Wildlife Management Area is located in the Jackson Prairie and the southeast corner of the Bienville National Forest.

This W.M.A (short for Wildlife Management Area) is nestled in South Central Mississippi where Newton, Jasper, Scott and Smith Counties converge...the four corners, as I call it. It is south of Interstate 20 near Lawrence, Mississippi, and northwest of Montrose, Mississippi, just off State Highway 15.

It has a lot of forest habitat types. The forest arrangements are mature loblolly, shortleaf, and longleaf pine forests; young, naturally-seeded and artificially-planted loblolly pine stands; mixed mature pine and upland hardwood forests; remnant prairies; and—best yet—bottomland hardwood forests.

These bottomland hardwood forests are along the upper tributaries of the Leaf River system. The creeks mentioned in this article are the West Tallahala Creek and Quarterliah Creek, along with many others not mentioned.

After I dressed and cranked up my 4x4 pickup to warm the engine, the morning was welcomed by a Brown Thrasher singing in the pre-sunrise morning. Also helping out with the singing were Northern Cardinals, Carolina Wrens, Carolina Chickadees, Tufted-Titmice, Eastern Bluebirds, and Pine Warblers, all welcoming the morning before my departure to Tallahala W.M.A.

This morning my mission as a bird watcher was to see if I could hear and see any new Spring migrants to the area. I traveled to my favorite birding spot on Tallahala W.M.A.—the Quarterliah Creek Bottom on Forest Service Road 506, east of the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, & Parks Tallahala W.M.A. Headquarters. As I arrived at my destination, the dirt road was busy with a lot of traffic from turkey hunters scouting for gobbling wild turkeys. The upcoming turkey season starts two weeks from today on March 20th.

I parked my 4x4 pickup off the road near Quarterliah Creek and walked up on the bridge to start my morning bird count. I was excited because the woods was a noisy choir of many birds singing. I heard Yellow-rumped Warblers, Tufted Titmice, Carolina Wrens, Northern Cardinals, Wood Ducks, Red-shouldered Hawks, Barred Owls, and especially Wild Turkeys gobbling. There was also a long list of woodpeckers—Red-headed, Downy, Hairy, Northern Flickers, Red-bellied and Pileated.

I also saw Wood Ducks flying throughout the woods, brushing their wings against the branches in search of nesting holes in hollow hardwood trees. I saw a Red-shouldered Hawk carrying nesting materials to a tall oak tree in the swamp bottom.

As I was still listening for other birds, a Barred Owl flew up in a nearby tree next to the creek bridge. This was enjoyable watching him sit still and hunt for squirrels, mice, and crawfish. As I looked at him through the binoculars, he was also paying close attention to me. I wondered to myself what he thought in owl language about this strange creature on the bridge with a pair of portable big eyes.

Anyway, my attention turned to hearing other birds singing and keeping a mental record of species seen and heard.. The Red-shouldered Hawk mentioned earlier, began squawking, and then the sudden boom of a Wild Turkey gobbling in the distance of the swamp bottom. MAN!!! The return of spring is spectacular!!! After hearing the turkey gobble a couple more times, my attention was then turned to an up-rising, buzzing song. It was what I had been waiting for, a sure sign of the "Return of Spring," a Northern Parula. He was in the top of a tall sweetgum tree singing his heart out at about 6:30 a.m. This is the earliest that I have heard one of these neotropical migrants in Mississippi. So I am here to tell you birdwatchers, if

possible, don't miss a morning from now on out to the full leafing-out of the trees!

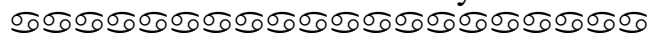
After hearing the Northern Parula, I was starting to see more Tufted Titmice, Yellow-rumped Warblers, Carolina Chickadees, and all the woodpeckers mentioned earlier, and even more Wood Ducks.

As I wrapped up my mental birding list, I was off to the West Tallahala Creek bottom when I saw a Wild Turkey hen cross the road ahead of me. Traveling about one-quarter mile more, I saw several turkey vultures checking out a road-killed Raccoon.

Upon arrival on the same road about four miles to the west (Forest Service Road 506) at the Tallahala Creek Bridge, I saw more Wood Ducks, Tufted Titmice, American Crows, and the same exact woodpecker species mentioned earlier.

The only new species was a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker on a willow tree which was added to my mental birding list. Also, Pine Warblers were singing loudly in the top of a lonely loblolly pine at this location.

To end this morning's bird adventure, I would like to encourage all you birdwatchers to visit your favorite birding area and see the return of Spring. You better hurry! Because it is here and don't you miss it!



They're Back! Barred Owls, That Is

By Howard Malone

I have mentioned in passing at our local OCAS meetings seeing Barred Owls around the place. Several years ago we noticed a Barred Owl (now identified as the male) calling in the late afternoons and finally found him, almost daily, sitting next to the main stem of the same black gum tree. We supposed that a nest was nearby and he was keeping "watch" overseeing the sitting female. We finally found the nest less than one hundred feet from our kitchen window, in an old, dying oak tree about 30 feet above the ground. The top of the tree had broken off at the junction of two major limbs, leaving an irregular depression in the middle where the nest was located. Before the

tree leafed out, one could see the top of Mom's head above the depression, but as leaves grew, nearby limbs blocked our view.

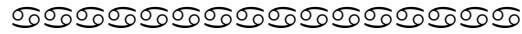
Each year the owls have returned to the yard, presumably to nest, but because decay had allowed the depression to become deeper, we can no longer see the mother on the nest. So far we have not seen any owlets but assume that they stay in the nest until night when they may come out to be fed and finally fledge. Not seeing an owlet through the years began to cause doubt that new owls were, in fact, being produced at the nesting site. Then---

Last Wednesday, 17th March, after sundown, while I was putting out bird seed for tomorrow's breakfast for my local mixed flock of feathered friends, I heard the call of a Barred Owl from along the stream which runs behind the house. His call seemed quite insistent (don't ask how I determined that—I just did), so I quickly produced my binos to take a look. It was sitting silhouetted against the lighter horizon, calling away. Just then, the female appeared from out of the nest and landed on a limb a few feet away. She then proceeded to whine, cry or keen—a voice never heard from an owl before—almost like a kitten. As the male continued to call, she flew to him, landing beside him on the limb of the tall cherry tree. They were quite vocal during the meeting, not the WHO-WHO call but a more intimate low “talking” voice. Then she left the perch and flew back toward the nesting tree. As she approached I saw, against the lighter sky, an elongated object in her beak. It could have been a lizard, a frog or salamander, or perhaps a portion of a small snake. At any rate, the male had caught “supper” and was delivering it to her. She flew directly to the nest and disappeared from sight.

I envision two scenarios from the action just witnessed: the female was incubating eggs and was being fed by the male, or very young owls were present and needed to be brooded and at the same time fed. In both cases, the female did not want to be away from the nest for any length of time.

I Googled “Barred Owl” and found several sites on the subject. I did find out that the female does the incubating, which is why I identified “him” and “her” in this article. I could not find any specific dates for nesting periods in Mississippi. Can any of you more experienced birders explain in more detail the situation in which food is exchanged between mates during the nesting period? Was she feeding babies, or is it too early for that?

Now if we could actually see one of the little critters, it would make our night, for we will have to get up in the middle of the night to check them out as they maneuver on limbs around the nest before getting old enough to fly.



Into the Woods...

By Lauren Thead

Everyone knows that casual walks in the woods are not the usual activities for OCAS members. Instead of strolling along, occasionally commenting on the bird song or an especially colorful flower, peaceably enjoying nature and just generally unwinding from a busy day, OCAS members tend to prefer looking up into the trees frequently in search of unusual birds, scanning the foliage itself for interesting plant species, searching the low-growing flowers in hopes of spotting delicate, elusive butterflies and moths. We are curious and get a certain enjoyment out of studying, naming and classifying wildlife that we see on our forays into the field. However, we do go outdoors to simply enjoy nature and unwind; we just also like learning something in the process.

The March 13th Audubon field trip at the Tallahala Wildlife Management Area matched our expectations perfectly. We all arrived excited at the designated meeting place at about 8:30 in the morning. In only a few minutes, we had headed off to the bottomland hardwood forests of the Tallahala. The trees there were newly leafing out, giving a fresh, delicate look to the whole forest. As soon as we arrived, we were greeted by the *reek* and *drink-your-tea* calls of the Eastern Towhees, many of which fed and sang from low shrub tangles near the banks of the Quarterliah Creek. There were birds everywhere! Especially pleasing to me was seeing the many Red-headed Woodpeckers that live in these woods. We immediately recognized them by their nasal squeals and got to watch them flying back and forth between the woods on either side of the road. At around the same time, a Barred Owl decided to call from somewhere off in the forest. And when Ed Brown hooted back very realistic-sounding Barred Owl speech—and the owl answered him—we were amused and impressed.

We agreed to walk a little way into the woods to see what else was stirring. Ed Brown's first-hand knowledge of the area helped us out a lot in our searches. He pointed out several interesting trees, such as Cherrybark Oak,

and many kinds of wildflowers along the moist path. The Pine Warblers sang loudly, but we were still able to pick out other bird songs from the continuous jumble of trills. A Ruby-crowned Kinglet warbled from its hidden perch in the oaks. Turkey Vultures and Great Blue Herons flew calmly overhead. Crows raucously mobbed a Red-shouldered Hawk. Just before leaving the bottomlands to see more of the Tallahala, we encountered a Falcate Orangetip, one of the earliest of the spring butterflies. And one of the last birds we heard from these woods was a Northern Parula, a recently arrived spring migrant.

Our party, led by Ed Brown, drove to one of the longleaf pine forests in the management area. This one had been burned sometime during the month, and as we walked into it, the blackened ground and crackly stubs of grass crunched under our feet. The resident Red-cockaded Woodpeckers never showed up, but the Brown-headed Nuthatches certainly did. They mostly communed near the tip of a tall, long-dead pine, giving us good views of their fidgety behavior. The snag had originally been the home of a pair of Pileated Woodpeckers, but recently it has been taken over by two American Kestrels. One of these kestrels called repeatedly from a distant pine, then flew out where we could see it.

It was now about noon. As we began to leave the area, Joe Johnson told us that he wanted to head over to Hickory to visit Joe McGee. This sounded good to the rest of us—we hadn't seen Joe in a long time since he's been working at the Earth Lab, and we all miss doing field trips with him, benefiting from his skills as a naturalist. Joe was more than happy to direct us to the egret rookery in Newton County, and we were eager to see it. The Cattle Egrets had not arrived yet, but there were other birds and wildlife to see around the edges of the 5-acre pond. There were Red-eared Sliders, two alligators, and a number of different frogs. I heard both Northern and Southern Cricket Frogs and a few Leopard Frogs while we were there. A Red-shouldered Hawk also made an appearance.

After this, Joe gave us the benefit of his expertise in identifying the unusual plants along the sides of the road. We all ate lunch, took Joe back to Hickory and left the forest. Would this have been a casual, easygoing walk in the woods for an average person? Probably not. But for us OCAS members, this was almost as good as a weekend on the beach.