

# Okatibbee Creek Audubon Society

## September 2004

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Note from Rich Richardson: Meetings are held at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Meridian every second Monday of the month at 7:00. 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. Next meeting: September 13, 7:00 p.m.

### **Sightings**

**Submitted by our members and others**

By **Lauren Thead**: 8/19 About 25 Wood Storks, Black-and-white Warbler. Loakfoma Lake, Noxubee National Wildlife Refuge, MS.

8/23 Wood Storks, about 100 Blue-winged Teal, Northern Waterthrush. NWWR.

8/28 Glossy Ibis, Least Terns, Black Terns, 4 Mississippi Kites, several Anhingas. Tara Wildlife Management Area, Eagle Lake, MS.

### **Events& Interesting Stuff**

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**Annual Hummingbird Migration Celebration, Strawberry Plains Audubon Center** September 10-12, 2004: Many educational

activities are planned for this year's event, which features the hummingbird experts from the Hummer/Bird Study Group banding and releasing Ruby-throated Hummingbirds during their southward migration. Some of the other activities and demonstrations scheduled for the celebration involve bats, alligators and other critters. A trade show featuring great nature related products will also be present.

Last year's celebration was attended by 3,000 people, making it the most popular single planned event for Holly Springs, MS. We're hoping to attract even more people this year, but to do that we will need volunteers to help with parking, equipment set-up, food service and other activities. We are also accepting sponsorships from corporations, groups or individuals. Please contact the staff at Strawberry Plains Audubon Center for more information at (662) 252-1155 or by email at <mailto:mriley@audubon.org>



A workday is planned for October (no firm date scheduled yet) at the **Duck Pond restoration site** at Strawberry Plains—Holly Springs.



Note from Sheila: I prevailed upon my friend Judith Ewing to contribute to our newsletter her thoughts and memories of a wonderful recent afternoon spent at the Noxubee Refuge. To give you a sense of what a special treat this is for us, I include her bio here: She's a contributing writer to ***Southern Breeze***, a publication of the Society of Children's Book Writer's and Illustrators. She writes both fiction and nonfiction for ***Alalitcom***, an annual anthology of the Alabama Writer's Conclave. Her poem "EarthWork" was chosen by a professional murmurer to be read as part of the entertainment for the Starkville, MS Gala Arts Festival in December 2003; the poem was also published by ***SWIG (A Little Poetry Book)*** in spring 2004. She is a guest reader for the Starkville Public Library (Children's Division) and reads for Three Generations Tea Room's annual Christmas luncheons. On November 1, 2004 she makes her debut on CD (***And Lo' the Angel Appeared***); "I, Joseph Take This Family" is her contribution to the Christmas CD of songs and stories which will benefit the Starkville Public Library's Children's Division.

## **Forecast for the Refuge: Good to Go!**

**By Judith Ewing**

**“The weather forecast for this afternoon and early evening: clouds definitely moving out and the sun shining profusely,”** sang out a familiar

voice on the phone. “It’s a perfect evening for an outing at the Noxubee Refuge.”

Remembering that rain had fallen all day, I had to smile at the enthusiasm of my caller who appeared giddy with the prospect of tromping through damp weeds, hungry mosquitoes, and sultry humidity for a late afternoon stroll in nature. My only prospect for this Monday night was cooking supper. In three seconds, I had answered, “Give me fifteen minutes to find my wading boots and round up my kids.”

“Refuge!” I charged to the troops as I quickly changed clothes, and grabbed mosquito spray, two pairs of binoculars, and our birding books. We were at the curb in record time where we awaited our ride. Actually, I had a novice in tow: my seven-year nephew had never been to the refuge, so I reassured him that there were no “lions, tigers, or bears” at the refuge. I crossed my fingers on the bears.

Michelle, our driver was still charged as we made our way down the graveled road into the refuge. “See! No rain!” she piped. “I knew I was going to get to go.” How could I not enjoy this?

We met our fellow nature travelers at the picnic area who were somewhat surprised by the number that climbed out of our vehicle: they expected one exuberant birder, not four. My friend, Sheila Thead, curiously asked, “What changed your mind?”

I shrugged, distinctly remembering my early morning conversation with her. *It’s raining. Don’t look for me in this weather. What do I look like?* Hmm... I could say that I was swayed by thoughts of everyone enjoying this late August afternoon except me standing over a hot stove. Instead, I replied, trying to hide a grin, “The weather girl.” I looked down at my feet. Besides, I had on my waders. Maybe, I am part duck.

After resettling our young riders, we traveled about 500 yards to a nearby overlook. It was six-thirty-ish and God had out his paintbrush. Between admiring the paint show, I heard snitches of conversation from a bat man we had picked up at the picnic area. “That should be a Great Blue Heron, ” he said, pointing to some moving speck in the sky. Though envious of his bat eyes, I settled for watching God paint; my eyes aren’t what they used to be. Binoculars only helped me if the bird was sitting still for long periods of time; it was not for those birds engaged in flight.

My kids were getting restless with nothing else moving in this area, so we moved on to Bluff Lake Boardwalk where we hiked a quarter of a mile along the wooden walkway. Smelling of insect spray, I was good to go as I meandered along this dense, foliage-lined, swamp trail. The rain had left it clean smelling and the only sounds were nature: roosting birds and frogs calling it a day. The cypress trees that lined the walk reminded me of a great wall, protecting its sanctuary and I've always been fascinated by those knobby knees sticking up out of the water.

Stooping over, I showed my nephew whirls in the swamp water where minnows and other water creatures bathed in the cold darkness. "Are they cold and scared of the night?" he asked. I hugged him to me. "No, it feels like home to them. Besides, their mamas are nearby." Letting me go, he skipped on ahead to find the others.

At the end of the boardwalk, the cypress trees opened out onto Bluff Lake where I relaxed in the shelter of this refuge, drinking in the restless whispers of this nesting habitat. Cattle egrets like white mounds of vanilla ice cream dotted the tree tops of the lake, chattering away as they settled in for the night. As many birds as there were in these colonies, I wondered if they ever needed an anger management seminar. At the very least, I imagined them discussing territorial rights. *It's my turn for the outside view. You always get the cool breeze.*

Presently, the fluttering stillness was broken by excited squeals, "Alligator! Come see!" The bat man informed us that this guy was probably eleven or twelve feet long. "Look between his eyes, that space is ten, eleven, or maybe twelve inches across. For every inch across, that is his length in feet." I acknowledged his snapping jaws. I didn't care about his eyes. Feeling silly, I paused to remember where I was and got past my fear. On a deeper level, I had to admit that he was a beautiful creature and I was in his habitat.

Reluctantly, our group gathered itself to leave the lake area and headed for one more place before it got dark: the Goose Overlook. We traveled along the road, discussing the afternoon's delights. Sheila lamented that Michelle did not get to see more bird life: a Cormorant or at least an Anhinga.

Ah, well, maybe another day. Or not. Our eagle-eye kids in the back of the van were not to be thwarted, “Wood Storks ahead!” And we were off the road in an instant, posed with binoculars in hand, gawking. Later, the bat man stood by as four young artists drew Wood Storks standing tall in bare trees, not moving. I took a picture in my mind of this moment for the time when my son was grown and away from home and childhood.

I didn’t walk down to the Goose Overlook with the others. The geese and loons were not there, yet. It was not time, too early. Maybe, another month or so would yield those great birds. The kids flew back on slightly tired feet from the Overlook, “Nothing interesting there. We’re hungry.”

Oh yeah, supper.

We rode back the twenty something miles from the Refuge to home. It was just Michelle and me on this drive; my two riders had opted to ride into town with the others. I smiled over at her and thanked her for calling me and reporting on the weather. The weather was perfect: cool with quiet breezes.

If she calls again, I’ll remember today and what I could have missed: life and opportunity calling in the name of friendship. It doesn’t get much better than this.

**REFRESHMENTS LIST**

September—Nancy Donald  
October—Larry and Cecilia Gordon  
November—Ruth Ann Rosamond  
January—Howard and Anne Malone  
February—Lauren and Sheila Thead

Remember, articles, bird sightings and items of interest are requested for the newsletter!

## New Model Hummers

By Lauren Thead

**H**ummingbirds buzz about, darting out with vicious energy, sparring with each other for possession of a port on my grandmother's nectar feeders, which are filled to the brims with the hummer-enticing mix of sugar-water. As is usual this time of year, immature birds outnumber the adults. They're pretty feisty; they have to be, in order to build up fat for their first migration across the Gulf of Mexico, because their elders aren't too likely to yield them a space at the feeder if they are not. In fact, one of these nectar-dispensers is already being dominated by an adult male Ruby-throated Hummingbird. The only birds that have a good chance at this spot are the females, both young and old. But let a young male hummingbird advance for a sip of nectar, and the adult male dashes out at him, asserting his dominance. Sometimes while this is going on, another immature hummingbird can sneak in to feed, but not for long. Other hummingbirds burst in to claim the feeding port.

With careful observation a surprising number of the birds can be told apart; all of the first-year males have dark striations on their throats, and most of them are also developing iridescent red feathers: a single scarlet feather in the center of the throat, a few scattered ones, or even a whole patch of them around the auricular (ear) area. I see one bird that fits into this last category; oddly, there is a patch of feathers on only one side of his head. The female hummingbirds have paler streaking on their throats, and the immatures can be told by their shorter bills. One bird has a slight indentation on its throat: missing feathers, or a scar? The way these creatures batter each other about, I'm inclined to think the latter.

The immature male with the asymmetrical feathering is back, fighting with the dominant male again. The rest of the birds continue to squabble for food. They surely must be getting enough to eat, judging by their plumpness. Watching the first year birds, especially, is interesting. They will be next year's breeding birds, if they survive. Only about twenty per cent of birds make it past their first year; many of them die during migration, and for these hummingbirds, a good store of fat is one of their most important assets. Before migrating, they consume enough food to double their body weight: flower nectar, sugar water, insects, and sometimes even rotting fruit.

The hummingbirds are still swarming around the sugar-water feeders as I leave my grandmother's house. I'll be watching for them next year.

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Joe McGee....Field Trip Chairperson

Ruth Ann Rosamond...Refreshments Coordinator

Lauren & Sheila Thead....Newsletter



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