

# THE BULLETIN

## Chapel Hill Bird Club

August, 2001

(Vol. XXX, No. 6-8)

c/o Ginger Travis  
5244 Old Woods Rd.  
Hillsborough, NC 27278

---

### See you in September!

The first CHBC meeting of the fall will be on **Monday, Sept. 24** at 7:30 p.m. in the lounge of Binkley Baptist Church. The speaker will be our own Rob Gluck, on the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, which some experts believe to be extinct -- yet there continue to be reports of sightings. Do a few ivorybills still hang on in remote Louisiana swamps? Rob's been out there to investigate. Come early, at 7:15 p.m., if you want to enjoy some refreshments before the meeting and yack about birds.

### Chatham County Fall Migration Count

**Sept. 15 (Sat.):** Lots of opportunities here, and beginners are welcome. See the CHBC website if you need to brush on the procedures for a bird count: [www.duke.edu/~cwcook/chbc/countprocedure.html](http://www.duke.edu/~cwcook/chbc/countprocedure.html). Call or email Will about where you'd like to count: 919-660-7423 or [cwcook@duke.edu](mailto:cwcook@duke.edu).

### Saturday field trips

These resume in September after Labor Day (but not Sept. 15). Trips leave from Glen Lennox shopping center at 7:30 a.m. Everyone is welcome. Call Doug Shadwick for details: 942-0429.

### More events . . .

- **Sept. 7-8 (Fri.-Sat.):** Public conference and celebration of 300 years of North Carolina nature writing, starting with John Lawson. Speakers include writers well known to N.C. birders and nature lovers: Marcus Simpson, Janet Lembke, Alan Feduccia, Jim Dean, Bland Simpson, David Cecelski, Eddie Nickens and Phillip Manning among others. Registration is just \$10. Location is Wilson Library on the UNC-Chapel Hill campus. To register or request more info, call Robert Anthony at 919-962-1172 or email him: [ranthony@email.unc.edu](mailto:ranthony@email.unc.edu).
- **Sept. 21-23 (Fri.-Sun.):** Carolina Bird Club fall meeting with lots of field trips. Location: Santee Cooper area of South Carolina. For details, go to [www.carolinabirdclub.org](http://www.carolinabirdclub.org).
- **Sept. 22 (Sat.)** 10 a.m.: Hawk watching at Bullhead Mountain on the Blue Ridge Parkway

(organized by the N.C. Audubon Society, but you don't have to be a member to participate). Meet at Mahogany Rock Overlook, near milepost 235, to caravan to nearby Bullhead Mountain. CHBC member James Coman, who lives in Alleghany County, spearheaded fund-raising to buy and protect this mountaintop. Bullhead has been accessible to the public for only a short time, so this is a good opportunity to see it -- and migrating hawks too. Need more info? Call Allison Bailey at N.C. Audubon: 919-929-3899.

- **Sept. 29 (Sat.):** 10 a.m., Mason Farm field trip for the Monarch butterfly migration. Leader: Pat Coin. Sponsored by New Hope Audubon. You don't have to be a member to take part. Meet in the Glen Lennox shopping center parking lot at 10 to caravan to Mason Farm.
- **Nov. 2-4 (Fri.-Sun.):** Wings Over Water Festival on the Outer Banks, including keynote speakers Don and Lillian Stokes and a magnificent array of field trips from Kitty Hawk to Ocracoke to the Alligator River NWR. Wings has something for all interests including beginning, intermediate and expert birders, paddlers, teachers, kids and people who just want to howl like (and at) red wolves. For more info, go to [www.northeast-nc.com/wings](http://www.northeast-nc.com/wings).

### What did you do this summer?

Your editor is looking for stories from folks who went birding this summer here, there and yonder. Write up your adventures! Stories can be long or short, doesn't matter. Please send them to me by Sept. 4 for inclusion in the September Bulletin: [Ginger\\_Travis@unc.edu](mailto:Ginger_Travis@unc.edu) or 5244 Old Woods Rd., Hillsborough, NC 27278.

### Dickcissel saga

*by Kent Fiala*

After looking at the nesting Warbling Vireos at Anilorac Farm west of Chapel Hill on May 27, Shelley Theye and Jill Froning ventured slightly further down Dairyland Road and discovered a singing male Dickcissel on powerlines along a hay

field. A Dickcissel is just rare enough to attract attention any place in North Carolina, and because this one was easily observed from a roadside and in a location where there is a high density of birders, a large number of birders enjoyed coming to see it, and participating in documenting its presence via Carolinabirds.

On June 10 Norman Budnitz reported seeing a female in the area, and the next day I observed the female building a nest. Shantanu Phukan also observed nest building on June 13. But then on June 17 I found the male absent, though the female was still present. That same day I met Rick Knight who had come from Tennessee to see both the Dickcissels and the Scissor-tailed Flycatchers (at Monroe). I don't know if anyone else came so far. The absence of the male was discouraging, but because of the continuing presence of the female we suspected that she must be incubating, so Shelley Theye contacted the owner of the field, Charles Snipes, and asked if he would leave an unmowed patch of grass around the nest site, which he was happy to agree to.

Cynthia Fox's group from Wild Bird Center discovered the male back in place and singing again on June 23. The next day, June 24, Shelley Theye and I located the nest, which contained 4 eggs. We put up two marker posts about 20 feet to either side of the nest so that Mr. Snipes would know where not to mow. The field was mowed June 27. On one side, mowing came within 8-10 feet of the nest, but on the other three sides about 20 feet was left.

Because I believed (perhaps incorrectly, in retrospect) that the male was gone as of June 17, I assumed that the female had to have begun incubating on about that day, because she was still building the nest 4 days before and it would take 4 days to lay the clutch of 4 eggs. Because incubation is about 12 days, I estimated that hatching might occur on June 29. Unaware of this prediction, Greg Dodge happened to be observing at the nest site on both the 28th and 29th, and his observations suggest that hatching did indeed occur on the 29th – the female came and went infrequently on the 28th, as is typical of an incubating bird, and she made frequent trips with food on the 29th. Over the next few days, I and others also observed the female bringing food to the nest. The male continued to sing from his powerline perches, but not so continually as before, and on occasions he went unseen for over an hour.

Dickcissels are reputed to fledge in just 7-9 days so it was expected that fledging might occur as early as July 6. On July 7 Shelley Theye and I both observed the female carrying food to locations well away from the nest, even across the road, so this prediction was borne out. I returned to the nest site for the first time since finding it and found the nest empty but intact. One unhatched egg was below the nest, so at most 3 young fledged. Later I collected

the nest and gave it to John Connors for the collection of the Museum of Natural Sciences.

## **Summer pelagic birding on *Miss Hatteras***

*by Steve Shultz*

June 2: Morning comes quickly and by 6 a.m. I am at Oden's dock [in Hatteras] and ready to board the *Miss Hatteras*. Today's trip draws a fairly good crowd. We leave promptly at 6:30 and head out of the harbor and into the sound. A short sail brings us to Hatteras Inlet and the first taste of the rough seas left behind by yesterday's storms. The boat rides heavily over the bar and into the ocean. The trip out to the deep water of the Gulf Stream should take about two hours. Unfortunately the rough water convinces many birders that hanging over the side might be a good way to pass the time. The seas were forecast for 5 to 7 feet, and they are all of that.

The seas make birding quite difficult, and rail space is at a premium due to all the folks hanging over the side. Also over the side are several baited lines that begin to draw attention from dolphin fish. Nearly all of the Gulf Stream pelagics do some fishing while offshore, and the *Miss Hatteras* is no exception. Today I get to try something new and actually bring one of the fish in to the boat. Although the dolphin is not particularly large, it is quite a thrill. A note of clarification: the dolphin fish is NOT FLIPPER. You probably already knew that. These are frequently served in restaurants as Mahi Mahi to keep those unfamiliar with warm-water fish from confusing the marine mammals with the fish.

The sun begins to break through about mid-morning and the sea abates somewhat. We begin to get reasonably good looks at Cory's and Audubon's Shearwaters and start seeing our first Black-capped Petrels. This petrel is a fairly common bird in the Stream off Hatteras, although it has not been many years since the species was thought to be extinct! The Black-capped breeds in the mountains of Hispaniola and is still threatened by deforestation.

Brian [Patteson, the trip organizer] calls our attention to a group of storm-petrels in the water in front of the boat. I make my way to the front of the boat and walk out on the section named the "pulpit" at the bow. The storm-petrels flush from the water as we approach. One of the birds is identified as a Leach's Storm-Petrel. I watch intently and soon pick the larger, browner bird from the more common Wilson's Storm-Petrels. Nice looks at Leach's are not always easy to come by so I am happy to get this look.

Back at the rear of the boat the chum line (the real one) is in full swing. A constant drip of Menhaden oil from a modified hot-water bottle produces a dilute oily slick in the wake of the cruising boat. The oil is occasionally supplemented by chunks of animal fat thrown into the slick. The chum line attracts a constant following of Wilson's

Storm-Petrels and occasional visits from petrels and shearwaters. Several birders are usually keeping an eye on the storm-petrel flock at any given time, as the uncommon Band-rumped Storm-Petrel visits from time to time. Today a Band-rumped spends some time behind the boat allowing me to observe the difference in size and flight style between the two species.

By noon the sun is shining and the seas are reasonably calm, although the birding is slow for most of the early afternoon. The highlight of the day for me comes at the end of one of these slow periods. We have been sailing in a wide circle trying to relocate a Herald Petrel identified by one of the trip leaders. Ironically I had been watching this bird for a few minutes thinking it was another distant Black-capped Petrel! In any case, we do not find the bird again, but as we are searching I see the unmistakable sight of a whale spout. Drawing Captain Stowe's attention to the dissipating spout, we head over in the direction of the still-hidden whale. A series of offset blows indicates we have found a Sperm Whale. We approach to a safe distance and watch in wonder as the great sea mammal lolls on the surface. As the swells roll across the whale we get glimpses of the huge, grey head and the flattened dorsal fin. The whale takes a long series of breaths before making a shallow dive. As the whale arches its back, the distinct pruned appearance of the flanks is visible. The whale disappears for a few minutes before surging from the water behind the boat. A full breach by a Sperm Whale is quite rare, and of course I am looking in the wrong direction when it happens. I do see the incredible splash as folks on the back of the boat yell out.

This whale may be accompanied by another, as the next sighting is of an animal that appears to have a more distinct dorsal fin. In any case, we are able to spend several more minutes watching the whale make a long series of breaths before slipping away beneath the waves.

The ride is now fairly enjoyable, and I get to spend some time meeting and talking to the other birders along on the trip. I must admit I think locally with regard to these offshore ventures. In reality, folks travel from all over to sample North Carolina's pelagic birding. Some of the people I meet are from Ottawa, others are from Seattle, and one couple is from Texas.

Back on the stern I get to bring in another dolphin and continue to watch the ever-present flock of storm-petrels dancing across the water in the wake of the boat. Many species of storm-petrel use their feet to patter along on the surface of the water while feeding. For this reason, local names for the birds frequently refer to their ability to "walk on water."

I spend most of the afternoon on the upper deck in the shade alongside the cabin. The most interesting bird sighted is an Osprey. It is quite unusual to see one this far offshore during a period

when the birds would not be migrating. The raptor soars overhead for a few minutes before drifting off.

It is now about time to start heading back to Hatteras, but before we turn landward a mixed flock of pelagic birds begins to swirl around the stern. Our chum line has finally done its job and brought birds in close enough to see well. About twenty Black-capped Petrels wheel in tight circles behind the boat. Our views are so good that we can even tell that the bird's feet are black and the legs pink. Mixed in with the petrels are Sooty, Cory's and Audubon's Shearwaters. This is what many people hope to see when they purchase passage on a pelagic trip. After twenty minutes or so of the spectacle, a white bird is sighted high in the sky. We watch as the bird approaches; it is a Tropicbird! Unfortunately for me this is a Red-billed Tropicbird. Although much rarer than the White-tailed Tropicbird, it is a species I have seen offshore before. Of course the rest of the boat is thrilled. Needless to say the return trip to port is quite jovial as most of the birders on board celebrate a rather rare life bird.

## **Colorado: looking for lifers (not too hard)**

*by Ginger Travis*

I was lucky and got time off for a wonderful, four-week camping vacation in July – three weeks in Colorado and a week of driving there and back. The trip wasn't supposed to be only about birds – we planned for Cathy Packer's young niece to join us for a week in the Rockies, and there's great geology to look at, and we like to cook outdoors and laze around camp reading old magazines. But I primed myself for birds by reading the Lane guide to Colorado twice. Forty life birds seemed the absolute maximum possible, with 30 a more realistic number for laid-back birders like Cathy and me.

Getting there was fun -- driving across the country, just looking at the slow change in trees and wildflowers as the eastern forest thinned away. On July 2, our second night out of Chapel Hill, we stayed in south-central Missouri at Hammond Camp on the north fork of the White River in Mark Twain National Forest. Here we were still in the eastern forest. There were tulip poplars and sweetgums and even dogwoods, and the place was full of familiar birds: Louisiana Waterthrush, Yellow-throated and Worm-eating Warblers, Northern Parula, Eastern Wood Pewee, White-eyed Vireo and Yellow-billed Cuckoo. But the next morning, just 50 miles to the west and still in Missouri, we saw a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher on a wire – the first western bird of the trip! ("West-of-the-Mississippi bird" is more accurate.) As we got closer to Kansas, we saw more and more post oaks, the dominant upland species near the prairie. Purple coneflowers bloomed on the roadside as we left Missouri and crossed into Kansas.

The 100<sup>th</sup> parallel is where the west officially begins, and that's just about the point in western

Kansas where we spotted our first Swainson's Hawk – and a Mississippi Kite to boot. The trees were gone by then. Billboards too. On U.S. Hwy. 160, we stopped once to identify a peculiar-looking bird perched on a wire – resting Common Nighthawk. Lots of them on the plains. And once as we zoomed down the road we glimpsed an eroded bank swarming with Bank Swallows.

July 4 was the first real day of birding. We were up at 4:30 a.m. and on the road by 5 to be at the Cimarron National Grassland, in the extreme southwestern corner of Kansas, by sunrise. At the Cimarron River, barely a trickle through a broad wash lined with cottonwoods, the birding started very slowly. Cathy, as usual, was first to see the male Bullock's Oriole, while I just saw a flying blur. But there were plenty more, including a female feeding fledglings, and I finally got a short but pretty good look at my life Bullock's male. Number one for the trip! There were Orchard Orioles too, Warbling Vireos, a few Eastern and many Western Kingbirds, American Magpies, Yellow Warblers, Barn and Rough-winged Swallows, and a small mystery flycatcher. (I was supposed to be working on western flycatchers. Not very successfully.)

Leaving the cottonwoods, we drove slowly along a dirt road through the grassland with me listening out the window for Cassin's Sparrows. The "grassland" actually contains lots of other dryland plants – including several that look like sagebrush and some spiny yuccalike things. The colors we saw were seldom very green – what I remember is tawny dried grasses and gray-green bushes and sometimes clumps of yellow Kansas sunflowers blooming cheerily on the shoulders. Dry but beautiful. The Cassin's Sparrows apparently had stopped singing, but I heard low contact notes in the bushes along the roadside. I got out and tried to walk the birds up – fruitless. They ran away under cover. Finally from the truck I saw a bird fly to a bush right on the road shoulder. "Stop! Stop!" Cathy mashed the brakes. From inside the truck I still had the bird in view – a sparrow, and I saw its gray face with my binoculars – and then it flew. I tracked this one through the bushes too, and it took two short, low flights. The second time I had it in my binoculars and got a good look at the whitish corners of the tail on an otherwise dark-backed sparrow. Cassin's it was! Life bird number two. Hey, two life birds and the day had hardly begun. Fun!

As we drove west on the dirt road we had a heavenly morning of grassland birding. We crossed into Colorado on Road M in Baca County, now headed into the Comanche National Grassland. Cultivated land was interspersed with big blocks of short-grass prairie. There were very few people – occasionally in the distance we'd see farm machines cutting wheat, but we went miles without seeing a single house or passing another car. Just blue skies and a few pump jacks in slow motion, pulling oil out of the ground

again now that prices are high. And birds, birds, birds: Horned Larks (lifer number three), Grasshopper Sparrows, Lark Buntings and meadowlarks by the dozen. We found small prairie dog towns on the roadside, with long-legged Burrowing Owls hanging around them. And then a couple of ravens flew over, and I was out of the truck again, because Chihuahuan Raven was a target bird. And these were Chihuahuans! (They were the fourth and last lifer of the day.) I could clearly see that their tails were rounded and not so wedge-shaped, and they did look smaller than Common Ravens. Eventually I heard them croak. A highlight was finding four raven fledglings lined up on a horizontal strut of a broken-down wooden windmill – a companionable-looking lot. And in a lone dwarf tree I also saw what appeared to be a young Swainson's Hawk crouching on the edge of a large nest. In early afternoon, in the middle of nowhere, we passed a Long-billed Curlew in a roadside ditch – the last of the prairie birds for us. Our day ended much farther west in the foothills of the Rockies. But that morning of grassland birding made a huge impression on us – there's nothing like seeing the grasslands up close for the first time. (The high plains are a tough place for humans to make a living, though. The few towns in southeastern Colorado are tiny, and most are dying.) *To be continued next month.*

### **Wanted: back issues of *Birding***

CHBC member Shantanu Phukan is in search of old copies of *Birding* magazine -- either as a loan for a short time or permanently if someone wants to get rid of theirs. He says: 'I just joined ABA this year and was aghast to find out what wonderful reading I have been missing out on. I can pick them up if you are local (Raleigh is not too far). I would greatly appreciate any help, especially since birding is so darned slow right now, and one has to devise ways to live vicariously.' If you can help, please call Shantanu at 919-967-9583.

### **Club officers**

*President:* Magnus Persmark (933-2255)

*Vice President (CH):* Judy Murray (942-2985, [jmurray@unc.edu](mailto:jmurray@unc.edu))

*Vice President (RDU):* Karen Bearden ([chickadeebirders@earthlink.net](mailto:chickadeebirders@earthlink.net))

*Secretary:* Karen Piplani ([karenpip@aol.com](mailto:karenpip@aol.com))

*Treasurer:* Ruth Roberson

*Field Trip Chairman:* Doug Shadwick (942-0479)

*Bulletin Editor:* Ginger Travis (942-7746, [Ginger\\_Travis@unc.edu](mailto:Ginger_Travis@unc.edu))

*Refreshments Chair:* Karen Piplani ([karenpip@aol.com](mailto:karenpip@aol.com))

*Webmaster:* Will Cook (660-7423, [cwcook@duke.edu](mailto:cwcook@duke.edu))

Website: <http://www.duke.edu/~cwcook/chbc>