

# THE BULLETIN

## Chapel Hill Bird Club

January, 2002

(Vol. XXXI, No. 1)

c/o Ginger Travis

5244 Old Woods Rd.

Hillsborough, NC 27278

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### January meeting – Falls Lake birds

When: **Monday, Jan. 28**, refreshments at 7:15 p.m.; program begins 7:30.

Where: Binkley Baptist Church in the lounge. Binkley is at the corner of Willow Drive and the 15-501 Bypass, next to University Mall, in Chapel Hill.

Program: Join us as Brian Bockhahn, Park Ranger at Falls Lake State Recreation Area, describes birding sites around Falls Lake, sharing slides covering the seasons and what birds to expect. Brian has a degree in Forest Technology from the New York State Ranger School in upstate New York. He hopes to bring copies of the the new Falls Lake Birding Trail brochure he's worked on. Falls Lake is a great birding spot, with more discoveries to be made.

### CHBC pelagic trips

Doug Shadwick is organizing club members for a couple of pelagic trips with Brian Patteson on the Outer Banks. You need to be quick if you want to get in on these: **Feb. 16** out of Hatteras, \$100 (weather make-up date is Feb. 17); and back to back trips **May 25 and May 26**, out of Hatteras (\$100) and Manteo (\$110) respectively. You can sign up for one or both of the May trips, but be aware that these Memorial Day weekend trips fill up long in advance. On the February trip, possible birds include Manx Shearwater, Northern Fulmar, Dovekie, and Atlantic Puffin. (An albatross or two has been seen in the past.) Interested? Call Doug at 942-0479. Also see Brian Patteson's website to learn what to expect if you've not been on a pelagic before: [www.patteson.com](http://www.patteson.com).

### Saturday morning field trips

Regular Sat. a.m. field trips are again under way. (But note: There will be no regular Sat. trip on Jan. 19 or Feb. 16.) The local Sat. field trips are free, and all are welcome. Participants leave at 7:30 a.m. from the Glen Lennox Shopping Center parking lot on the north side of Hwy. 54 just east of the Hwy. 15-501 Bypass; you'll return by noon. For details of the destination du jour, call Doug Shadwick at 942-0479.

### Last call for lists

Come on now, don't be shy! No number is too big or too small. Send your totals for ABA area, world, N.C., year, yard, or whatever other lists you keep, for publication in the February Bulletin. Deadline: Feb. 8. You can either email me, [ginger\\_travis@unc.edu](mailto:ginger_travis@unc.edu), or use my postal address at 5244 Old Woods Rd., Hillsborough, N.C. 27278.

### New N.C. Big Year record

*by Russ Tyndall, to Carolinabirds*

My wife, Patricia, and I did a N.C. Big Year in 2001. For anyone who does not know, a Big Year is the attempt to tally as many species as possible within a certain geographical area in a calendar year. A Wilson's Warbler (initially discovered on the Wilmington Christmas Count) seen at Airlie Gardens on 12/31 was our 344th and final species of the year seen or heard in NC. To the best of our knowledge, this sets a new N.C. record, breaking an earlier record of 339 (adjusted for the Sharp-tailed Sparrow split) set in 1993. This was really made possible due to the legion of Carolinabirds posters who shared their 2001 sightings and enabled us to relocate birds that they had found! . . . We are working on a web site in which we will show some Big Year statistics (mileage, etc.) and list the species recorded. . . . Thanks to all of you who shared your sightings with us in 2001!

*Russ and Patricia Tyndall live in Wake Forest.*

### Very exciting N.C. bird: Green-tailed Towhee

*by Derb Carter, Will Cook*

*Note: Derb Carter reported that a Green-tailed Towhee was observed by Greg Massey on the Southport CBC on Jan. 5. Derb then relocated the bird on Jan 6. Initially this was believed to be a first state record, but, according to Harry LeGrand, this is the second sighting for Green-tailed Towhee in N.C. that he knows of. The first, in the 1970s at Bodie Island, was not written up for The Chat. (And the N.C. Bird Records Committee did not yet exist.) The Sibley Guide shows the summer range for Green-tailed Towhee as the western states and the winter range as Mexico and the border region of Arizona,*

*New Mexico, and Texas – with occasional records of the species throughout all the southern states and up the east coast. It appears N.C. was due! G.T.*

Directions to the towhee (by Derb Carter, Jan. 7): It is with a flock of about 100 sparrows (white-throated, white-crowned, song, and a few swamp and fox) feeding in a weedy field on the ADM property near Southport. The site is less than 1/2 mile down Shepard Road just beyond where the road makes a right hand curve. Best landmark in the huge pile of gypsum on the right (south side) of the road. The flock hangs out in the thick green hedgerow that borders the road on the south side in this area. The flock crosses to the north side of the road to feed in a dense but small stand of head high dried weedy plants, returning across the road to the hedgerow if disturbed. PLEASE NOTE that the property on both sides of the road is fenced, posted and enforced. . . Shepard Road is a right hand turn off River Road out of Southport. When you enter Southport by the water front area take a left hand turn at the light. Pass the state ferry landing and follow the road until you can not proceed any further because of a gate. Turn left here on Shepard Road.

Towhee refound Jan, 9 (by Will Cook): Seven birders visited the Green-tailed Towhee spot yesterday (1/9/02) from 8:30 am - 4:30 pm. During the morning we tried quiet observation with no pishing or tapes -- no luck with the towhee. During the afternoon we tried playing tapes of the GT Towhee song, pishing, and screech-owling -- absolutely no response from the bird. It was a fairly windy day (10-20 mph), especially after 11 am, which didn't help matters. For another bonus, a front-end loader was noisily working on the gypsum mountain all day, plus the wind was blowing the sulphurous stench from the pile right to us.

At about 1:45 pm, however, during one of the many lulls in our efforts at finding the bird, I happened to notice an unfamiliarly-shaped bird sitting atop a nearby Yaupon (*Ilex vomitoria*) bush. Put my binoculars up -- it was the towhee! I got a nice 5-10 second look before it ducked down. The other birders rushed in to try to get a glimpse, but only Jeff Phippen managed a 1-second look before it disappeared into the thicket. The most striking field mark, besides the shape, is the white throat, followed by the chestnut crown and greenish tail. We were not able to glimpse it again. Tapes and pishing had absolutely no effect.

This particular spot is on the right side of the road near a group of three pine trees (the middle one dead), just after the utility wires cross the road. Ricky Davis managed to see a Yellow-breasted Chat in this thicket, which the rest of us missed. The thicket is very dense and impenetrable, composed of Yaupon interwoven with Catbriers (*Smilax* spp.).

We did have a good showing of four green Painted Buntings - easily seen feeding on the bird

seed pile in the weedy field that Derb Carter started. Ricky started another bird seed pile on the opposite side of the road, a little further up. We also saw the goose trio (1 white Snow, 1 blue Snow, 1 Ross's) in the field behind the green field just past the towhee spot. This area is posted, but the ADM folks we met said they thought it would be OK if we wandered around a bit in search of the towhee. Might be a good idea to check again before wandering back there.

So the good news is that the Green-tailed Towhee is still there, but the bad news is that it can be extremely difficult to see -- there's a good chance you'll miss it even if you spend all day looking. It would probably help to visit the area on a non-windy day.

## **Calliope Hummingbirds in N.C.**

*by Susan Campbell*

(Dec. 24) Amazingly I actually banded two Calliopes here in the central part of N.C. this week: one Saturday and then one Sunday! The one I banded Saturday (hatch year male) is in a confidential location and not regular at the feeder. The hummer I banded yesterday is another young male—absolutely gorgeous with one magenta gorget feather flaring out already—at a feeder in Winston-Salem (veteran winter hummer feeders and HBSG supporters, the Williamses: Charles and Ann; at 2652 Forest Drive). YES! Two Calliopes banded in N.C. in two days!!

*Note: The Williamses welcome people to come see the bird. No need to call first, just follow the driveway to the rear of the house. The feeder is on the left rear of the house. The bird also spends much time in a small maple tree immediately in front of the garage. A first Forsyth County record. Ramona Snavely (This bird was still being reported seen as of Jan. 11.)*

## **Winter hummer survives snow and cold**

*by Kent Fiala*

(Jan. 8) The Rufous Hummingbird that appeared in my yard in central Orange County on Nov. 7 continues to visit my feeders. Susan Campbell captured and banded it on Dec. 22 and identified it as an adult (probably second-year) female. While Susan set up the trap, the bird came and chattered at her and also investigated her red turtleneck, and I believe that it took slightly less than 30 seconds for it to enter the trap after Susan stepped back.

At first I had thought that my Rufous might be the same bird that was visiting Ginger Travis's yard, but coordinated observations proved that we were each seeing our birds simultaneously. Further careful observations suggest that my bird rarely strays far from my house. It can sometimes be observed simply perching for the entire time between its feeder visits. I've also seen it hawking insects and

once saw it working its way up a tree trunk, looking exactly like a hovering Brown Creeper.

It took the recent winter storm in stride, incongruous as a hummingbird in a foot of snow may appear. I only needed to switch to a 1-to-3 sugar water solution and to bring the feeders in to stay warm overnight.

## **Durham Christmas Bird Count in brief**

*by Mike Schultz, compiler*

The Durham, N.C. CBC was held December 16th. We had excellent mild weather and found 10,248 birds of 92 species. Highlights included: Merlin, Greater Yellowlegs, Least Sandpiper, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Fish Crow, 2 Red-breasted Nuthatches, 2 Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, Black and White Warbler, and Rusty Blackbirds. Many thanks to Norm Budnitz, Owen McConnell, George Barlow and Doug Shadwick for their fine reports. Birds in high numbers included an astonishing 342 vultures, split nearly evenly between both species, 43 Red-headed Woodpeckers, (all species of woodpeckers were near record numbers, courtesy of Hurricane Fran??), and new high counts for Red-shouldered Hawk, Eastern Towhee, and American Goldfinch. Eastern Meadowlarks returned to a diminished 12 after a disappointingly short-lived spike of 77 last year, and Bobwhites reached the ultimate low of zero. However, we had 2 Loggerhead Shrikes, our other vanishing open country bird.

## **Jordan Lake Christmas Bird Count**

*by Norm Budnitz, compiler*

The Jordan Lake (NC) Christmas Bird Count on 12/30/01 was the first typically wintry day after a fairly long period of very mild and very dry weather. Our counters identified 95 species (same as last year), only a bit above our average of 93 for the preceding ten years. Our total of 14,649 individual birds was some 3,000 shy of our average and 8,000 (!) shy of last year's record (22,906). We had 56 birders in 23 parties (about average for recent counts) who counted for 135 party-hours (also about average). 14,649 divided by 135 is approximately 109 birds per party hour. This is our lowest ratio since 1994. Why so low? Two possibilities come to mind: a) the recent drought and/or b) the recent mild weather that might have allowed water fowl to linger further north. (Of course, perhaps the relatively cold weather, after such a long mild spell, might have constrained a less hardy crew of counters, but I would never suspect such a response from our stalwart squad!)

In spite of the low total, we did count a few record highs: 1,157 Double-crested Cormorants (up from 1,075), 18 Bald Eagles (up from 16), 21 Hairy Woodpeckers (up from 20), 54 Winter Wrens (up from 27), and 426 Eastern Bluebirds (up from 414). And we did find a few oddballs: After working

Harris Lake, Will Cook and Judy Teague poached a few good birds at Ebenezer Point. Their best sighting was a group of 5 Tundra Swans flying overhead. They also found 2 Common Mergansers, 1 American Black Duck (seen earlier by Harold Carter), and 2 Ruddy Ducks (probably the same birds seen by Tom Howard and Brian Bockhahn). Tom and Brian also reported a Green-winged Teal, which they think may have been injured. Pam Timmons and Perry Haaland had a Greater Yellowlegs on a mud flat exposed by the low lake level at Little Beaver Creek. This is only the second winter record for our count!

In the passerine department, Doug Shadwick and Jack McLain found a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher and our sole Blue-headed Vireo of the day. Tom Howard and Brian Bockhahn found a Black-and-White Warbler, as did Harold Carter. John Frederick reported a Loggerhead Shrike, always iffy these days. Terry and Barbara Logue found a couple of Common Yellowthroats, Rouse Wilson and Andy Upshaw pulled out a White-crowned Sparrow, and Barbara Roth, Betty King, Barbara Brooks, and Beth Duncan found one Rusty Blackbird. The Roth contingent also scoped a partial albino American Goldfinch. It had a yellow head atop an otherwise completely white body. It was seen feeding with other Goldfinches, perched on a seed head. Nice find.

Misses for the year? Well, we always have a few. No Turkeys, Woodcock, or Great Horned Owls. No Red-breasted Nuthatches, Brown-headed Cowbirds, or Baltimore Orioles. And although this may be a "finch year," our numbers were fairly low: 47 Purple Finches were above average, but we only had 8 Pine Siskins and 1 lone Evening Grosbeak sharing a mud puddle with a Cedar Waxwing. For the record: We had 56 birders in 23 parties. They put in 135 party hours (100 on foot, 35 by car), 280 miles (82 on foot, 198 by car), and 4 hours and 13.5 miles owling. The weather was cold (28F to 42F) with winds increasing from calm at dawn to 10 mph in the afternoon. The sky was overcast at dawn, but cleared quickly and remained clear for most of the day. There was no precipitation. No one reported significant ice coverage.

## **Chapel Hill CBC summary**

*by Will Cook, compiler*

The 71st Chapel Hill Christmas Bird Count was held on Sunday, December 23, 2001. It was a nice day, not too cold or windy, though considerably cooler than it had been recently, and there were extensive mudflats on Jordan Lake in the southern part of the count circle. We counted a total of 89 species, which is the well above the average 84, and 18018 individual birds, the most since 1981. We had an average level of participation, but the number of birds per party hour was 126, well above the average of 105.

Best birds of the count were three species that have only been found once before: Doug Shadwick and Anson Cooke independently found 2 Tundra Swans on Jordan Lake (there was 1 in 1961), Norm Budnitz poached the blue Snow Goose at Durham Academy that John Frederick found before the count (must be the same bird that was near there last year), and Doug Shadwick had a Greater Yellowlegs in the New Hope Creek mudflats (we had one in 1979).

Other goodies: Josh Rose found our first Loggerhead Shrike since 1986 (they used to be much more common, this is our 39th count record), my party found two Common Yellowthroats at Mason Farm (same as last year, last record before that was 1983), and Shelley Theye had a Baltimore Oriole in her yard in Chatham County. Another highlight for me was seeing a Bobcat at the Orange County landfill. It was walking about the trash heap amongst a bunch of vultures! (I guess they're adapting to modern civilization.)

We set or tied a large number of record highs: 219 Double-crested Cormorants (old record 115 in 1997), 2 Tundra Swans, 37 Red-shouldered Hawks (27 in 1998), 120 Bonaparte's Gull (93 in 1998), 87 Red-headed Woodpeckers (ties record set last year), 31 Hairy Woodpecker (28 in 1999), 20 Pileated Woodpeckers (18 last year), 416 Tufted Titmice (397 last year), 124 White-breasted Nuthatches (115 last year), 95 Brown-headed Nuthatches (71 last year), 39 Winter Wrens (ties 1999), 400 American Pipits (325 in 1984), 142 Chipping Sparrows (120 in 1989), and an astonishing 786 American Goldfinches (491 in 1982). Other birds found in exceptionally high numbers were owls (highest total since 1985), the other woodpecker species (all 7 species were either record highs or second highest), Eastern Towhee, and Brown-headed Cowbird. The highs we're setting for woodpeckers may have something to do with all the downed and damaged trees from Hurricane Fran in 1996, but why so many goldfinches this year?

Lows: We missed Wood Duck for the first time since 1989 and American Kestrel for the first time since 1969. The Jordan Lake count also missed kestrel. Purple Finch numbers were also quite low.

Weather: Low 29 F, high 60 F, wind east 0-5 mph, partly cloudy-cloudy, no precipitation, water open. Effort: 40 observers in 21 field parties, 142.5 party hours (113.75 by foot, 28.75 by car), 311 party miles (88 by foot, 223 by car), 5 hours and 17 miles owling, 6 people and 17 hours watching feeders.

You can see the full count results online: <http://www.birdsource.org/CBCOutput/review.html?yr=102&circle=S846461>

Thanks to all participants for an outstanding count!

Addendum: Three hummingbirds (2 Rufous, 1 Calliope) outside, but tantalizingly close to (<1 mile), the count circle. These were banded by Susan Campbell the day before the count.

## **New River CBC, Dec. 22**

*by James Coman, compiler*

The 2001 New River (North Carolina) CBC had 14 participants in field parties and one feeder watcher, about normal participation for this count in the last few years. This count circle is centered in west central Alleghany County and includes part of extreme southern Grayson County, Virginia. Elevation ranges from approximately 2550' along the New River near Independence to 4300' in the Peach Bottom Mountains between Whitehead and Laurel Springs.

The 2001 CBC produced 64 species, plus 1 during the count week, not a record, but about normal. Two species were new to the count, Green-Winged Teal and Red-Breasted Merganser. One, a well described House Wren (A. Boynton), was unusual in winter in the mountains.

Several trends have developed over the past few years that I consider important, as follows: The as yet inexplicable drop in Wild Turkey numbers, increasing and variable waterfowl numbers, and the recently increasing numbers of both eagle species in Alleghany and Ashe counties during winter.

Wild Turkeys numbers in this count circle and the adjacent Mount Jefferson CBC circle (east and central Ashe) had been increasing throughout the last decade, with New River recording 400 birds and Mt. Jefferson 125 birds in the 2000 CBC, both highs. This year New River recorded 125 Turkeys and Mt. Jefferson 25, thus showing declines of roughly 70 to 80%. Though I doubt that the actual decline is that great, I do not think that this is a fluke. Since mid-summer I have noticed a great drop in Turkey numbers, or at least those visible from the backroads of Ashe and Alleghany that I drive regularly in my job. Conversations with deer, grouse, and rabbit hunters this fall have reinforced this observation. For whatever reason, Wild Turkey populations have dropped here. I have only found one carcass on my own farm, that I took to be of a very slow-moving and obviously distressed tom visible on the pasture on several occasions in June. As no one has mentioned disease, nor mentioned the finding of large numbers of carcasses, I tend to discount an epidemic, though it may be possible. The only other new factor locally appears to be the burgeoning coyote population, which should not affect adult Turkeys, but certainly could predate nests. . . .

Waterfowl, except for Canada Geese, continue to be highly variable. The Green-Winged Teal (A. Boynton and E. Harrold) is certainly late and a first for the count. Similarly, the Red-Breasted Merganser (J. Keighton) is new and unusual. There are a number of species of ducks, however, as well as Pied-Billed Grebe, that would be more expected but were absent this year, with only Mallards being widely distributed. Canada Geese set a new high, with 264 birds.

The adult Golden Eagle (A. Boynton and E. Harrold) on the count marks the second year in a row that this spectacular bird has been on the New River CBC. Despite an intensive search on the 23rd and 24th, we were unable to relocate this bird. We missed a count week imm. Bald Eagle (H. & V. Blevins) by only two days, when Harrol Blevins reported a third-year bird on the New River. A week earlier, on the Mt. Jefferson CBC, adjacent to the New River CBC circle, a first year Bald Eagle was reported (Coman and Coman). Thus this year we had three eagles present in western Alleghany and eastern Ashe in a two-week period. Over the last five years eagle reports out of the migration periods have increased significantly. Lately, since '96, we have been having 3 to 4 Golden Eagles in this area November - March and possibly 10 to 12 Bald Eagles reported during the same period. As the number of birders has been constant, I assume this is due to more eagles. Great!

A number of species were present either in very low numbers; Hermit Thrush 2, Purple Finch 2, Ruby-Crowned Kinglet 2, Brown Creeper 1; or absent; Bobwhite, Common Snipe, Woodcock. A pleasant surprise was an imm. Red-Headed Woodpecker, which is very difficult to locate locally.

### **Birding Brazil, pt. 3, (Sept. 2001)**

*by Magnus Persmark*

“Marco Polo” brought us to Chapada, a small town that serves as the gateway to Chapada dos Guimarães National Park. In the transition between the cerrado and the Amazon rainforest, the Guimarães escarpment acts as the dividing line between the Paraguay and Amazon River basins, forming an ecosystem of great ecological value. The geology of the park, with sheer sandstone canyon walls and fascinating geological formations, brings the Southwest to mind and it boasts in addition dramatic waterfalls and well-preserved cerrado vegetation. The cerrado occupies the central Brazil plateau, originally covering about 22% of the country, and it is one of the most important types of tropical vegetation in Brazil. It is an old, in geological terms, biogeographic region with poor and acid soils that consists largely of savannah, woodland/savannah, and dry forest ecosystems, although the vegetation ranges from open grasslands to dense woodlands. The cerrado flora is considered the richest of all tropical savanna regions and the cerrado is Brazil’s second hotspot for endemism. It is also the second largest of Brazil’s major ecoregions.

Although the term “Cerrado” means “dense” or “closed” in Portuguese and Spanish, the tree and scrub savannah at Chapada is open and easily hiked. Trees and shrubs with thick, fire-resistant bark, twisted trunks and limbs sporting large, thick leaves dominate it and it has a nearly continuous ground cover of grasses, sedges, and forbs. The area thus resembles the South African “veld”. We enjoyed

several days exploring in the area, admiring the geology and the open landscape. The avian highlight was undoubtedly the visual and auditory cacophony of several parrot species, including Red-and-Green Macaw, Red-bellied Macaw and Blue-winged Macaw, gathering at dusk at their nesting/roosting sites on the sheer canyon cliffs. In addition we were treated to excellent views of the normally hard-to-see Red-winged Tinamou and Pheasant Cuckoo, a Orange-breasted Falcon engaged in aerial acrobatics among the Biscutate and Great Dusky Swifts over the canyon voids. In the cerrado proper we were fortunate to spot several of the endemic birds, such as the sought after Red-legged Seriema, White-eared Puffbird, a cooperative Sharp-tailed Streamcreeper, Collared Crescentchest, Chapada Flycatcher, the Curl-crested Jay and the rare Coal-crested Finch; several of these species are regional endemics. On a side trip to a forested area near the hotel we spotted a gorgeous Blue-crowned Motmot, had stunning looks at zero distance of a pair of the minute White-wedged Piculet at the nest hole, and saw White-rumped and White-banded Tanager. We felt the energy at the nearby geodesic center of South America and held a respectful distance to an eighth-inch pseudoscorpion. We were here also awed by views of the magnificently plumaged Helmeted Manakin as it moved rapidly and (seemingly) erratically among tree branches. At Chapada we saw a few warblers, including Flavescent and Golden-crowned, a family that not otherwise was prominently represented on this trip. In this little town we also had our essentially only glimpse of civilized Brazil and enjoyed shopping and people watching; it was fascinating to observe how at night street vendors electrified their carts of various foodstuffs by simply hot-wiring from an exposed town mains cable....

**Alta Floresta & Cristalino Reserve** After a few days of the relatively moderate temperature- and humidity levels at Chapada, it was time to move on to more tropical climes. At this juncture we should have bid both Juan and Franklin goodbye, but having been so impressed at their guiding skills we attempted to sign both up for the Amazonian leg of the trip as well. Alas, Franklin had new customers with whom to travel the mud-caked roads of Pantanal, so with only Juan in tow (rather the other way around), we boarded a domestic flight to Alta Floresta in northern Mato Grosso and southern Amazonia. The town of Alta Floresta was founded some thirty years ago to exploit the region’s “natural resources”. Today an heiress of an original developer is attempting to prevent further deforestation into the Amazon and has set aside a huge swath of private land as a buffer against further encroachment by loggers and farmers. The resulting Rio Cristalino reserve is a premier birding spot in Brazil and indeed all of South America and boasts an outstanding

example of pristine *Terra Firme* forest. Alta Floresta is located at the headwaters of the Tapajós River that separates different populations of many forest birds, which contributes to its rich avifauna. First, however, a few hours of sobering—and depressing—reality, as we flew over miles and miles of denuded, burned and plowed land. One did get a very poignant sense of how remote this location actually was by observing workers raising a palm frond-shaded hut on hotel property in the traditional manner, all the while conversing in an indigenous language. At a luxurious hotel in Alta Floresta Dona Antonia gave us a presentation of the conservation plan and on hotel property observed such magnificent birds as White-browed Hawk, Crimson-bellied Parakeet and the impressive Red-necked Woodpecker and the rather unattractive Bare-necked Fruitcrow.

The next morning we headed through a recently logged area to the landing spot at the Teles Pires River; in the succession of deforestation the high value timber is selectively removed for lumber, then the “junk” trees are cleared, cows are moved in for a few years, and then soybean cultivation takes over. Brazil, as we learned, is the greatest producer in the world of soybeans. On the way through this depressing area, we nevertheless saw such interesting birds as Point-tailed Palmcreeper and White-faced Whistling Duck. We soon turned off onto the smaller Cristalino River in two boats, with Merrill and Ida in the smaller speeding ahead of the rest of the group. This was the real Amazonia so many of us had dreamt about visiting and we were tense with anticipation of what the area would bring. We were already scanning the riverine forest edge and sky for birds when we saw the first boat approaching.

Above the din of the outboard motor we heard Merrill yell something about Harpy and annoyedly brushed aside this poor-taste joke. Then we noticed that Merrill was actually levitating and realized that the prize of South American raptors had been spotted. The huge eagle with enormously powerful talons and tarsi made for snatching monkeys off branches sat calmly while we observed in stunned silence. This was simply too unreal to be true and as it finally and majestically lifted off into the forest, we remained below for a few minutes, silent and grateful for having got the privilege to observe something so rare as being almost primordial and other-worldly. Not long after a Sungrebe, alone in its family, quickly snapped us back into reality with its uncanny ability to blend in with the riverside tangle, revealed only by its harlequin-colored legs, and a Green-and-Rufous Kingfisher made the fifth observed species in its family.

Carefully carved out from the pristine forest, the Cristalino lodge on the bank of the eponymous river was modest by all measures, but an absolutely delightful base from which to discover the area. Its

staff was absolutely delightful and epitomized Brazilian hospitality, whether as expert river guides or cooks of delicious Brazilian food and drink. Following early morning summons (clap, clap) by Juan, the routine at the lodge entailed birding for a few hours before breakfast along the reserve’s many trails, a siesta after lunch during the day’s hottest hours and then again birding in the afternoon/evening. And it was indeed hot and muggier than any of us had ever experienced. Clothes could be worn for perhaps half a day before they had to be rinsed clean of sweat and grime. If one was too worn out for hiking, the lodge grounds provided plenty of animal life: a Blackish Nightjar on a gravel patch and a Taira helping itself from the few banana trees in the garden. At a wet patches one could sit for hours observing the amazing profusion of absolutely spectacular butterflies, including several *Heliconius* and *Morpho* species.

A favorite destination (at least for some of us) was the 150-foot canopy tower, from which we had spectacular views over the forest and of its winged and tree-dwelling denizens. From this vantage point we observed at eye-level the recently described Kawall’s Parrot, the interesting Red-fan Parrot, Scarlet Macaw, White-bellied Parrot, Red-necked Aracari, Fork-tailed Flycatcher, Crested Oropendola, the brilliant Paradise Tanager and Amazonian Pygmy-Owl. All the while the we were serenaded by the wonderful and strange sounds of the forest, the deep, penetrating calls of Howler Monkeys, the eerie sound of the Screaming Piha’s we actually never saw—and the persistent buzz of stinging sweat bees. Along the trails on the forest floors we again were impressed by Juan’s skills at hearing and identifying many of the avian skulkers, antbirds, antwrens, antpittas, woodcreepers and the like.

We searched for ant-swarms, of course, and as everyone who has birded Neotropical forests knows, finding one of these equals striking avian gold. In this case gold corresponded to Point-tailed Palmcreeper, Glossy Antshrike, Amazonian Antshrike, Spot-winged Antshrike, Ornate Antwren, Rufous-tailed Foliage-Gleaner, Black-faced Dacnis, Flame-crested Tanager, Slate-colored Grosbeak, Red-legged Honeycreeper and Rose-breasted Grosbeak. While the mature forest was dominated by impressive trees, particularly enormous Brazil nut trees, shrouded in vines, bromeliads and orchids (unfortunately most of these were not in bloom), we were surprised to find several niches of dramatically different microhabitats. Thus, at clearings created by fallen giants we found dense bamboo patches, and we found also a hillock topped by rocky outcroppings and a much drier forest, with a profusion of bromeliads, sharp-leafed agave-like plants and even cacti. Here we were delighted to come across the diminutive Short-tailed Pygmy Tyrant and three large tortoises. We were

subsequently astounded to find the species, Yellow-footed Tortoise, featured in a recent National Geographic "Canon's Endangered Wildlife" series article.

Amazonia is, of course, closely associated with its famous river and naturally we ventured up the Cristalino, its sub-sub-sub-tributary on several occasions. On an evening cruise we realized that we had shared the waters with way too many caymans and saw courting (or territory holding) Common Potoo. In Cristalino's dark waters we came across a family of Giant Otter and unfortunately frightened a Tapir as it languidly swam the soft current. The river, by the way, afforded much needed and welcome relief from the brutal mid-day heat. Our expert guides also brought us to one of its ox-bow lakes, where we observed the bizarre Hoatzin. The young of this monotypic species, that more than perhaps any other species evokes a dinosaur-like progenitor, evaded arboreal predators by dropping into the river below the nest, to then climb back up using claws on its wings. Here along the Cristalino we also saw Blue-necked and Paradise Jacamar, Amazonian Umbrellabird, Spangled Cotinga, Drab Water-tyrant, Large-headed Flatbill and nesting Blue-and Yellow Macaws. Heading into another oxbow lake we, as well as the guide, were stunned to find an Agami Heron expertly fishing just a few yards away from our boats, totally oblivious to our presence. This beautiful heron is extremely hard to find and our guide, who had cruised the river daily for five years, had previously seen it on but five occasions. He had, in comparison, seen Harpy Eagle eleven times.....

We finally left this paradise full of impressions and memories, both of its natural treasures and its friendly people. Just as it was difficult to digest the many impressions, and indeed to keep track of the various species of unfamiliar birds (we tallied a staggering total of 471 species), so it was easy to realize the tremendous importance of preserving this part of the world intact for more people to experience and simply let live.

## **Yard surprise**

*by John Frederick*

Sometimes you just have a good day...While taking down my Christmas decorations I look up in my front yard and what a surprise...an immature Bald Eagle! A new bird to my yard list...not bad for a SW Durham neighborhood (off Hope Valley Rd.)! He was just gliding along. It motivated me to get my binoculars. Several minutes later, I saw a large feeding flock in trees behind my house. Climbing up a trunk was a Black and White Warbler! The 'specials' ended there. No Siskins, Grosbeaks, P. Finches or RB Nuthatches! But those two were enough for one day!

## **Cold day in a San Antonio hotspot**

*by Ginger Travis*

Picture Mason Farm with a little bit of Pea Island thrown in, and that's Mitchell Lake, the beloved hotspot of San Antonio, Texas. The locals bird it intensively year-round and have recorded more than 300 species within its boundaries.

I knew of Mitchell Lake from the excellent website of the San Antonio Audubon Society, which publishes up-to-date trip listings. (There's no public access to Mitchell Lake for individuals, only for approved groups.) I planned to be in Texas for four days before Christmas – shirking my bird-counting duties on the Chapel Hill CBC – so a Dec. 23 Mitchell Lake outing looked pretty good.

I took the 410 loop to the south side of San Antonio, exited on Moursund Avenue, went a half-mile south – and would have missed the locked gate except for a handy landmark: "Beto's Chapparral," a bar right across the road. While I waited on the road shoulder for the rest of the group to arrive I watched a couple of Vesper Sparrows, and I heard a woodpecker call that I could have sworn was a Hairy – except that on a roadside phone pole in thorn scrub country it turned out to be Ladderbacked. A meadowlark in the dry grass could have been either species at this time of year.

Our trip leader, Lily Engler, arrived and unlocked the gate. Mitchell Lake is a wetland that was noted on an eighteenth century map as a "lagunilla." In the twentieth century it was used by the city of San Antonio as part of its sewage disposal system. Today it's a wildlife refuge, and the diked settling ponds now hold water of varying depths, so the area appeals to all kinds of shorebirds and ducks. Rarities are seen every year, and relatively uncommon birds like Roseate Spoonbill, Least Grebe and Groove-billed Ani get birders pretty excited. Even on a slow day – and ours was slow – there's always something at Mitchell Lake.

Our group was a good size: six people, two of us out-of-towners. We drove slowly through patchy thorn scrub and dead grass. Almost immediately the lead car stopped and we all hopped out. A long-necked raptor flew by, showing white in its wings: Crested Caracara. And not just one. The place was overrun with caracaras and hawks – more than I've ever seen in one place in my life. Raptor City. It was almost bizarre. We saw one kettle of eight caracaras – this species was dominant in numbers. Next most numerous was Red-tailed Hawk. If they weren't flying, they were perched in the tops of low thorn trees – once I saw three in adjacent trees. Then came Northern Harriers, just a couple of those. And last – and best – a pair, count 'em, of Harris's Hawks. We got excellent looks at the twosome perched in roadside trees, and we also saw them on the wing. According to the San Antonio checklist, Harris's is uncommon in winter. (So is

Crested Caracara, but maybe the list needs revising.) For the locals the Harris's Hawks seemed to be the best birds of the day – but not for me. Something better awaited at the end of the trip.

Waterfowl numbers were disappointing. There were tons of Northern Shovelers and a lot of Ruddies but not a whole lot else: a handful of Pintails, Gadwall, and Green-winged Teal (no Cinnamon). There were coots and American White Pelicans and a flyby of needle-nosed shorebirds that someone identified as Long-billed Dowitchers. We saw a couple of depressed-looking Great Blue Herons and, in the distance, a flock of Cattle Egrets. Bonaparte's Gulls settled briefly on a pond. Three cormorants on a stump turned out to be Neotropics with that white-edged facial skin. I didn't expect them in San Antonio, but they're listed as a nesting species. The city is at the very northern edge of what's regarded as south Texas, and it does get some of the same species as on the Gulf coast and in the Rio Grande valley.

Passerines were very scarce – too cold and windy. But one of the locals spotted a Vermillion Flycatcher with a pale orange belly; then we found more, til we'd seen five, running the gamut from patchy pale orange to full-body fire-engine red. A knockout for us out-of-state birders. I spotted a couple of Orange-crowned Warblers in company with Yellow-rumpeds. (Tons of Orange-crowneds in south Texas, so it's a great place to really learn this bird.) There was a phoebe, a couple of Loggerhead Shrikes, a little flock of White-crowned Sparrows, and one gray-faced Lincoln's. A female Northern Cardinal momentarily got everyone's hopes up for Pyrrhuloxia. And that was it.

When we got back to a wide spot in the road where I'd left my rental car, the guy I was riding around with (a very low-key John Olerud-lookalike originally from Minnesota) said to me, "Oh, by the way, there's a Barn Owl in that second shed over there, if you're interested." Interested? I zipped over to the dilapidated building, with the birder from Florida right on my heels. We peered in the doorway and saw a rodent ossuary. Thousands of mouse bones in little heaps of disintegrated pellets. And more tiny skulls than I could count. It was cool in a Stephen King-ish way. But no owl. The Florida guy suddenly yelped. He'd stuck his head in the door of the other shed, and the Barn Owl almost flew up his nose! I saw the owl whiz away, and it was darker than I expected. I followed it to a thorn tree where I thought it landed, then to another tree where it finally perched in the open in plain sight. My binoculars sucked it in, and then it turned that heart-shaped face toward me, and its dark eyes locked on mine. Oh boy! Was that a life look or what? The Floridian and I broke out in huge grins.

San Antonio is a great place for birding – 426 species on the checklist – and S.A. Audubon is very

welcoming and gets a lot of visitors on its trips. Also, the club website has many pages describing notable birding destinations in the hill country just north of San Antonio and in the thorn scrub to the south, including possible locations for the three more-or-less-local specialties: Golden-cheeked Warbler, Black-capped Vireo, and Cave Swallow. (Once in spring I followed the directions to Friedrich Wilderness Park and found the warbler, no problem.) If you're going to San Antonio, check out this webpage: [www.saudubon.org](http://www.saudubon.org)

And if you believe the quickest way into the local culture is by what you eat, then San Antonio will make you happy. Our trip leader told us about an authentic southside taco joint up Moursund Avenue from Mitchell Lake. I had to give it a pass, but I did screech to a stop at a barbecue shack on Broadway when I saw smoke curling out the back – the Bun-N-Barrel. When I walked in the take-out entrance of the cook shack and saw the years of grease caked on the walls, I almost cried. Nothing will ever replace Allen's Barbecue in my heart, and I don't believe Texas beef equals N.C. pig, but I like to reconfirm these home truths as often as possible. Hey, we bird on our stomachs, don't we?

## **Triangle birding destinations revisited:**

### **Mason Farm**

New from Will Cook, for the virtual guide to Triangle birding destinations, is his writeup on the Mason Farm Biological Reserve. Check it out: [www.duke.edu/~cwcook/tbg/masonfarm.html](http://www.duke.edu/~cwcook/tbg/masonfarm.html)

### **And congratulations to . . .**

Rob Gluck, whose good story about UNC's Barred Owls appeared on the opinion page of the Jan. 6 Chapel Hill News. Way to go, Rob!

### **Happy new year! (Things to do, 2002.)**

Please resolve to renew your membership in the Chapel Hill Bird Club. It's time, if your mailing label has the number 01/02 in the upper right corner. Membership works on the calendar year: \$15 for individuals or families; \$10 for students. We encourage you to renew for more than one year if you're feeling flush – it simplifies things for the club. Write your check to the **Chapel Hill Bird Club** and mail to our treasurer: **Ruth Roberson, 3406 Ogburn Ct., Durham 27705.**

### **Those Ivory-billeds back in the news . . .**

This time it's the front page of the Wall Street Journal (Jan. 16) reporting on the 30-day expedition beginning Jan. 17 in La. to search for the perhaps-not-extinct-after-all Ivory-billed Woodpecker, based on David Kulivan's report three years ago that he had seen one. Rob Gluck spoke on this topic at a CHBC meeting in the fall. The search continues . . .