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Doug Pratt

# Chapel Hill Bird Club Bulletin

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## Next Meeting: Monday, 28 October

**When/where:** 7:15 pm refreshments; 7:30 pm meeting. The lounge, Olin T Binkley Baptist Church, corner of Highway 15-501 Bypass and Willow Drive, behind University Mall, Chapel Hill.

Join us also for dinner at 6.00 pm at the K&W cafeteria in University Mall preceding the 7.00 pm meeting. This is a regular feature of our monthly meetings.

### **28 October; Erich Jarvis: Vocal learning in songbirds.**

The next time someone calls you "birdbrain," smile and thank them! New research reveals structures in the brains of songbirds that are similar to our own, structures that enable songbirds to learn songs and pass them down to the next generation. Erich Jarvis is an associate professor of neurobiology at Duke University Medical Center and the winner of several awards for his research on vocal learning in

songbirds. Come and join us as Erich shares what he and his team of researchers have learned about the amazing brains of songbirds and the relationship between songbird vocalizations and human language.

## Saturday Field Trips

Trips are led by **Doug Shadwick** and depart from Glen Lennox Shopping Center parking lot off Highway 54 promptly at 7.30 every Saturday morning. All skill levels are welcome. Trips are usually over by noon. Dress for the weather and for walking. Details? Call Doug at 919 942 0479.

Call Doug the night before in case the trip is not local and leaves from another location.

## Book Review

Derek Nieman *Birds in a Cage*

This book is about World War 2 prisoners of war (POWs) in Germany who survived prolonged imprison-

ment largely because of their interest in birds. All four had distinguished careers after their release – three of them in ornithology.

The four were:

- 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant John Buxton, born 1912, captured in Norway in 1940.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Peter Conder, born 1919, captured in France in 1940 after 7 days of active service.
- Squadron Leader (RAF) John Barrett. Born 1913, captured in Germany in 1941.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant George Waterston, born 1911, captured in Crete in 1941.

Three were released in 1945 after being moved often, from one camp to another, sometimes together, sometimes not. Waterston was released earlier because he was too ill to be a fighting risk. In late 1941, Warburg was the camp where the four first met each other and began birding together, at first watching only magpies, crows and a Rough-legged Buzzard all foraging in the snow.

Earlier, in another camp, Conder noticed a man who was obviously watching birds, but did not learn till much later and in another camp that it was Buxton and that he was watching Black-necked Grebes, which Conder had not recognized in their winter plumage. In the meantime, advised by his brother-in-law (who had established Britain's first bird observatory on the island of Skokholm) that studying one or two species in great detail might help preserve his sanity, Buxton chose the Common Redstart ("for its grace and beauty") and Goldfinches. His work, on redstarts, published in 1950, is still

rated as one of the best bird monographs. Never had redstarts been watched in such detail – thousands of hours of observation, notes written on any kind of paper that could be found. The fledging, though, was not well recorded -- Russia's entry into the war brought restrictions on time allowed outdoors.

The enthusiasm of these four men was contagious. They formed bird clubs, gave talks, reported weekly bird lists, explained points of identification. When the first chaffinches arrived in spring migration, they were observed during every daylight hour until they left to go south again. The ornithologists were not always happy with the quality of the amateurs' notes though.

All this was done without benefit of binoculars (Waterston buried his rather than let his captors take them), and initially without books to help identify species. Eventually a substantial library (2000+ books!) was amassed with books sent by family, friends and sympathetic guards. Probably at some risk to the German, Buxton carried on an extensive correspondence with Dr Erwin Stresemann, a German ornithologist he had met at an International Ornithological Congress; Stresemann even provided bands for a banding program. When Stresemann published a paper on the birds of Crete he acknowledged Waterston's contribution to it. His friendship with Waterston and Buxton lasted the rest of their lives.

Another German ornithologist, Niethammer who was curator of birds at Bonn Museum, sent the POWs his three volume *Handbuch der Deutcher Vogelkunde* – their best field guide. When Niethammer

was not curating birds he was an occasional guard at Auschwitz for which he served three years in a Polish prison having voluntarily surrendered to the Allies.

Waterston was repatriated in 1943 with other ailing POWs. While in captivity he had written a proposal to purchase Fair Isle (halfway between Shetland and the Orkneys) to develop a bird observatory there. This proposal, his notes on the birds of Crete, his observations on belligerent wrynecks, and a paper with Buxton on the future of bird observatories in Britain were in his limited luggage. The paper on bird observatories was soon published in *Country Life*. Fair Isle was bought and Waterston became the first director; it now belongs to the RSPB.<sup>1</sup>

Peter Conder became director of the RSPB, increasing its membership from 20,000 to 200,000.

John Buxton became an academic, teaching literature at Oxford. The distinction between “ornithologists” – with degrees in science – and birders (amateurs) was becoming more important. Still, he remained a naturalist, was a founder of the Wildlife Trust, and edited *The Birds of Wiltshire*.

John Barrett ran an outdoor education center in Pembrokeshire (Wales) and inspired many a young naturalist, though he regretted not having inspired more POWs to watch birds.

## Future Meetings

The vice presidents have enlisted a terrific cast of speakers for our monthly meetings in the coming

year We meet the third Thursday of most months – not in December or during the summer. The speakers are:

November 25: **Don Seriff:** Early birders of the greater Charlotte region.

January 27: **Ali Iyoob:** My NC Big Year.

February 24: **Scott Winton:** Mattamuskeet waterfowl and climate change.

March 24: **Charlotte Goedsche:** Cerulean warblers of Bull Creek.

April 28: : **Judy & David Smith:** Birding Ethiopia.

May 19: **Brian Bockhahn:** Spectacular birds of NC state parks.

**More details in coming Bulletins!**

## Officers of the Chapel Hill Bird Club

### *Elected Officers*

**President:** David Smith

(davidjudysmith@frontier.com)

**Vice President (Durham area):** Eddie Owens (banjoman\_57@yahoo.com)

**Vice President (Chapel Hill area):** Kent Fiala (kent.fiala@gmail.com)

**Treasurer:** Patricia Bailey (pbailey\_489@yahoo.com)

**Secretary:** Edith Tatum (etatum@nc.rr.com)

### *Appointed Officers*

**Bird Count Supervisor/compiler:**

Will Cook (cwcook@duke.edu)

**Field Trip Chairman:** Doug Shadwick (dougshadwick@nc.rr.com)

**Bulletin Editor:** Judith Fortney (jafortney1@aol.com)

**Webmaster:** Will Cook (cwcook@duke.edu)

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<sup>1</sup> Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.