

# Audubon News

April 2004

A publication of the Mecklenburg Audubon

Volume 9, Number 8

Audubon News is published nine times a year, September – May by Mecklenburg Audubon Society  
Serving Cabarrus, Gaston, Iredell, Lincoln, Mecklenburg and Union Counties in NC and York County SC.

## Monthly Meeting

## Wonderful, Wandering Warblers



*Warblers are a great leveler,  
and a boon to the cause of humility.*

Hugh Willoughby, Rhode Island Birder



April is an exciting month in the bird world around Charlotte. Resident birds are busy raising their first broods and singing up a song. And most importantly the migrants are coming. Of particular interest to birders experienced and inexperienced alike are the warblers. Most are only in the area for a few days as they eat their way north to their breeding grounds. Why are birders so fascinated by warblers? It's certainly not their beautiful warbling

songs since most of them don't warble at all. They are brightly colored, but most of the time you have to crane your neck for long periods of time to catch a glimpse of their golden feathers, which leads to what is known among orthopedic specialists as 'warbler neck'. No, the real attraction of these mighty balls of fluff is the challenge of identifying them. They, along with sparrows and winter gulls, are what make bird watching a sport.

So to help prepare you for this spring warbler migration Larry Barden will be showing a wonderful video on warbler identification. He will also lead a discussion on how and where to find warblers in the Charlotte area. Don't miss this very informative meeting on Thursday, April 1<sup>st</sup>. [No, it's not a joke.] We will meet as always in the fellowship hall of the Sharon Seventh Day Adventist Church at 7:30 PM. See you all there.

## Want to Make Your Bird Watching Excursions Really Count?

Most of you have participated in one of the many 'counts' that Mecklenburg Audubon does throughout the year, but have you ever thought about making your daily/weekly bird watching activities really count for the birds in Mecklenburg County? Back in February several board members met with folks from the Conservation Science Office [CSO] of Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation Dept. Our primary reason for meeting was to discuss the need for data to support conservation initiatives and local habitat protection efforts in Mecklenburg County. Mecklenburg Audubon's records of bird species found in what is now the Evergreen Nature Preserve was very influential in getting that property designated a nature preserve. We are again being asked to help in identifying habitats in the county that need

protection. COS is compiling a comprehensive, historical database of Mecklenburg avifauna [that's science talk for birds]. They will be using this information to plan species conservation and habitat preservation efforts in the county. The database will help them with vital questions such as – What is the current local status of species? What species are in decline? What species are increasing? They will also use the data to support land purchase recommendations.

CSO has several staff members that monitor most of the county's public lands and Natural Heritage sites that were identified in the mid 90s. But they need your eyes and ears to tell them what birds are being seen when and where on a daily and seasonal basis. They also need to know where birds are breeding. If you have blue birds, chickadees or robins

nesting in your neighborhood they want to know about it.

So how can you help? First, take a look at the Field Data Sheet on page five of the newsletter. [There is an electronic copy available on the Mecklenburg website.] Fill out the sheet and submit it whenever you spend more than fifteen minutes looking at birds during a day. Although the database is being compiled by the Mecklenburg Park and Recreation Dept. they are soliciting information from surrounding counties, so you folks in Gaston, Union, Lincoln, Iredell, Cabarrus and York counties aren't off the hook. This database is intended to be a source of regional information and will be shared with all the surrounding counties.

Secondly, if you have birds nesting in yard, neighborhood or know of any nest

*Continued on page 4*



## FIELD TRIPS

*Please remember to contact the trip leaders several days before the trip. If you don't, you may not receive information about last minute changes or cancellations. Also, if we don't know you are coming we might leave without you!!*

### Saturday, April 3rd Congaree Swamp **CANCELLED**

### Saturday, April 10th Green Swamp, Brunswick Co.

For those of you who might be in the Wilmington area over the Easter holiday, Taylor Piephoff will be leading a field trip into the Green Swamp in Brunswick County. This Nature Conservancy property is a unique habitat that is fast disappearing in NC. Target birds for the trip will be the Bachman's Sparrow and Red-cockaded Woodpecker. You will also have an opportunity to see endangered venus flytraps and sundews. Butterflies should also be abundant.

If you are interested in this trip please contact Taylor Piephoff at 704-532-6336 or piephofft@aol.com before April 5th for details.

### Saturday, April 10th Redlair Farm, Gaston County

For those of you who are staying in the area for the Easter weekend we will have a 1/2 trip to the Catawba Land Conservancy property in Gaston County. Although we will mainly be looking for birds, there will also be a lot of flora to look at, especially the big leaf magnolias.

Rob Bierregaard will be leading this trip so if you are interested in going contact him at 704-333-2405 or rbierreg@email.uncc.edu for details.

### Saturday, April 24th McAlpine Greenway [1/2 day]

Charlotte area greenways are great places to observe the spring migration. McAlpine, one of the oldest greenways, has a variety of habitats that attract various species of neotropical migrants - wetlands, open fields, shrubs and deciduous forests.

We'll meet at the Sardis Rd. parking lot at 7:00 to beat the crowds at this popular greenway. Be prepared to do a lot of walking although it will not be strenuous. Bring water and snacks, sunscreen and/or hat if it's sunny. Bug spray may not be a bad idea either.

If you want to be a part of this field trip contact Judy Walker at 704-537-8181 [leave a message] or birdwalker@mac.com.

### Sunday, May 2nd Latta Park [1/2 day]

Back by popular demand, this field trip is really just a stroll around the park. A very slow stroll at that. If the birding gods are with us this should be peak time for neotropical migrants - orioles, tanagers, rose-breasted grosbeaks, thrushes, and of course warblers!!! It is not unusual to see ovenbirds, veerys and Swainson's warblers walking around the park with you! Last year we had 20 species of warblers.

We will meet at the park at 7:15 AM. Be prepared to do a little walking and a lot of standing looking up into the trees. If you want to join the group contact Judy Walker at 704-537-8181 [leave a message] or birdwalker@mac.com.

## Audubon of North Carolina Annual Meeting April 16th & 17th



Join fellow bird and nature enthusiasts from across the state as the Audubon Society of Forsyth County hosts the 11th Annual Audubon North Carolina Meeting on April 16th & 17th in Winston-Salem, NC. This year's event features a private screening of the award-winning "Winged Migration" at the North Carolina School of the Arts and many field trips and programs

This year the annual meeting features daylong field trips to Pilot Mountain and Hanging Rock State Parks. Shorter programs include field trips to some of the Piedmont Triad's most popular birding spots, such as Reynolda House and Gardens, Tanglewood Park and Greensboro Lakes, as well as a special trip to the Emily Allen Wildflower Preserve.

On Saturday morning, there is an opportunity to attend a special indoor presentation on seabirds hosted by Dr. David Anderson, Associate Professor of Biology at Wake Forest University, an expert on the evolutionary and behavioral ecology of birds. The festivities on Saturday continue with a reception at the Inn, followed by a seated dinner and dessert. NC Audubon Executive Director Chris Canfield will deliver his annual report during dinner. Later Saturday evening, join us for a private screening of Jacques Perrin's highly acclaimed film, "Winged Migration," at the North Carolina School of the Arts. Participation is open to the public, so members please invite your friends!

If you have questions regarding the annual meeting, contact Sebastian "C" Sommer at 336.761.8216 or via email at nancsom@triad.rr.com. You can also receive information from the NC Audubon office at 919.929.3899. Complete information on the meeting can be found in your February newsletter or on the MAS web site - meckbirds.org.

# Hey! Was that a Warbler?

Excerpted from *The Complete Birder: A Guide to Better Birding*. By Jack Connor.

Warblers are easy to *find*; it's *identifying* them that's so tough. Hawks, shorebirds, and other challenging groups of birds often allow leisurely observation. You can set up your scope, open the field guide, compare a bird with its associates, and call over an expert for help. Warblers do not stand still for telescopes, field guides, or expert assistance. One glimpse and they're gone: "See us now or see us never."

Some sparrows can be as elusive as warblers, but sparrows seldom travel in mixed flocks. If you can identify one or two species in a flock of sparrows, you've generally identified them all. Warblers usually travel in small bands of several species. While you struggle to identify one or two in a feeding party, four or five other flicker against the light, skip behind the leaves, and slip off into the shadows.

One common sequence of events in warbler watching might be called the warbler four-count. One, a warbler lands on a branch; two, it snatches up an insect; three, it glances around; four, it flies. Stop, snatch, look, *go*. Stop, snatch, look, *go*. From the birder's point of view, the sequence usually translates into "Hey! What? Uh? *Damn!*"

All warblers except the yellow-rump need insect prey to survive. The majority winter in the Caribbean or in Central America. Since they wait until insects are plentiful in our area, they are generally among the last migrants to arrive. When they come, they come at night, often accompanied by other late passerines in huge waves of birds.

Warblers are surprisingly strong fliers. They usually avoid storms by flying over them (up to altitudes of more than three miles, radar tracking has found). When the weather is good, they frequently cover more than a hundred miles in a single night's flight. A banded yellow-rumped warbler once flew 450 miles in two days.

## WHERE TO LOOK?

Good warbler spots tend to have most of the following elements: 1) low deciduous trees, 2) thick, tangled undergrowth, 3) an open or semi-open canopy, 4) clear edges,

5) fresh water, 6) wind protection and 7) pathways that are wide (four feet across or wider) and/or elevated. The first six elements attract the warblers. The last makes it easier to look at them.

Quiet roads around lakes or along rivers are usually excellent warbler spots. The birds frequently feed in the tree limbs closest to the road or reveal themselves by flying across the road and landing in the first tree they reach on the other side. These roads are generally elevated, at least one side, and the extra height offers an advantage to the birder, since the top of a 10- or 12-foot tree may be at eye level.

Ironically, city parks, college campuses, and similar "less natural" habitats are often much better for warbler watching than deep and pretty lowland forests. In artificially landscaped areas, warblers will take refuge in widely separated lines of trees. Unless they are severely disturbed, they tend to move along these lines and so are more easily tacked.

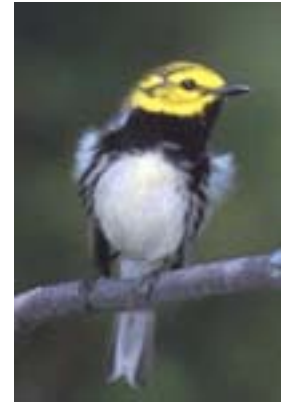
## STRATIGRAPHIC SPECIALISTS:

Most warblers prefer certain heights. In many cases the preference is so strong that the stratigraphic level occupied by the warbler can be a clue to its identity.

Other stratigraphic preferences are more subtle and harder to chart, but may still prove helpful once you become aware of them. In the East, for example, you should look twice at any "female hooded warbler" Fly-catching over your head: there's a good chance that the bird is a female Wilson's. Hooded warblers will sometimes be seen up in the mid-levels (especially singing males), but they are more often seen near waist level and below.

You may also find that the stratigraphic preference for particular migrant warblers

in your area may differ from those described in the books (including this one).



Spring, as every birder knows, is the best season for warbler watching. The

birds are in their finest plumage, and many sing strongly when they are still hundreds of miles south of their nesting grounds. What is not so well known is how brief the spring migration period actually is and how easy it is to miss.

Some warblers move north relatively early – the yellow-rumped, pine, palm, Louisiana waterthrush, black and white, yellow-throated, yellow, prairie, palm, and black-throated green. Three species tend to come late: the blackpoll, morning, and Connecticut. The rest tend to come together and pass through any given area within a period of three weeks or less. Typical peak periods appear in table 3, and dedicated warbler chasers try to be out in the field at every opportunity during the peak period, since weather patterns will determine the fallouts, and these are almost impossible to predict.

No general guide can list the warblers in the sequence in which they will arrive in your area. Different species of warblers migrate at different speeds, so where you live will determine when each reaches you. The parula, for example, is one as early as the first week in March. It moves northward slowly, however, and does not arrive in Maine until mid-May during the main influx of warblers there.

Especially in spring, the morning after a night of hard rain is the best time to look for a fallout of passerine migrants. Birding during days of intermittent rain can also be productive. The birds will continue to feed

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## STRATIGRAPHIC PREFERENCES OF WARBLERS

**HIGH LEVEL:** Blackburnian, blackpoll, black-throated green, cerulean, chestnut-sided, Tennessee, Yellow-throated.

**MID-LEVEL:** Bay-breasted, black-throated blue, blue-winged, Canada, magnolia, prothonotary

**LOW LEVEL:** Common yellowthroat, Connecticut, Kentucky, mourning, ovenbird, palm, Swainson's, waterthrushes (both), and worm-eating.

during light rains. If the showers stop and the sun breaks through, you can find yourself suddenly surrounded by parties of celebrating, hyperactive warblers.

Wind is a more serious problem. Warblers are more sensitive to wind than most birds and tend to stop moving and hide inside the foliage even during moderate gusts. If the wind starts to blow steadily at more than fifteen miles per hour or so, you should search deeper (and lower) in the woods or, better yet, put on your hawk-watching hat and save the warblers for another day.

The simple and ultimately delightful truth about warblers is that you can never identify all you see. No one can. This is ultimately delightful because it means warblers are always a challenge – warblers will *always* be a challenge – no matter how skilled you become. You can only become faster and more accurate in identifying them; you can never overmaster them.



## 7 WARBLERS FOR BEGINNING BIRDERS

### BLACK & WHITE

Walks along trunks and tree limbs; the *nuthatch* warbler.

### PARULA

Tiny and hyperactive; “flickety” wings; the *kinglet* warbler.

### YELLOW

Frequently found in more open areas than other warblers – e.g. solitary willows and farmside hedgerows; the *canary* warbler.

### OVENBIRD

Prefers dense undergrowth to open edges and limbs to branches; walks, hops, and teeters; unmistakable song; the *thrush* warbler.

### COMMON YELLOWTHROAT

Male is the *raccoon-faced* warbler; both sexes very curious; if you can’t pish a yellowthroat, you can’t pish.

### REDSTART

Fantails and flycatches at all levels; bright and beautiful, the *butterfly* warbler; in Latin America called *candelita* – the little torch.

### YELLOW-RUMPED

Widespread and abundant, especially in colder weather; the *ubiquitous* warbler.

## BASIC TECHNIQUES FOR WARBLER IDENTIFICATION

- 1. Start slowly.** Here’s a paradoxical principle for beginners: *disregard the warblers you can’t identify*. When a feeding party appears, look first for the seven species – Black and white, parula, yellow, ovenbird, common yellowthroat, redstart, and yellow-rumped. If your experience is limited, you should study these carefully, and on your first five or ten field trips, forget the rest. Build up your base of experience. When you can tell the easy species at a glance, you will find your eyes moving quickly and efficiently through the flock, and you can advance naturally to the tougher identifications.
- 2. Use the field guide with restraint.** Stopping to consult the field guide is always dangerous when chasing warblers. If the bird is still in sight, you’re spending time you could be using to get a better look – and giving the bird a better chance to escape. Try to keep your eyes on the bird as long as possible and use your field guide as you last resort, not your first one. When you do open your book, always try to guess the identity of the bird first, and then look only at the illustration of that particular species. If your guess is wrong, *look back at the bird in the field*, take another guess, and look only at the illustration for that species. This technique requires self-discipline, but it forces you to realize which species give you problems. And it helps you develop your abilities.
- 3. Scan with binoculars.** Search-scanning with binoculars can be an effective technique with warblers, especially in bad light or in thick woods. Search-scanning seems unnatural at first: most people instinctively wait to catch a glimpse of movement, then try to locate the bird with their naked eyes, and *then* lift their binoculars. You’ll see more of each warbler, however, if you *go to the binoculars at the first sign of movement*. Doing so saves three or four seconds, and often enough, that’s all the time a warbler will give you. This technique has a bonus: scanning for one bird, you’ll stumble on others you’ve missed with your naked eyes.
- 4. Aim for the head first.** When you first have a warbler in your binoculars, concentrate on the head and face. Do not shift your gaze until you have studied the bill, eyes, cheeks, cap, and throat. Most of the field guides separate the warblers according to the presence or absence of wing bars, as this is the easiest way to divide them into two groups. The fact is, though, that only four or five species can be identified by their wing patterns alone. If you spend the first precious seconds studying the wings first, the birds will often escape before you’ve seen anything else – and you’ll be left thumbing through your field guide. Every single spring male, almost all spring females, and even most fall warblers of both sexes can be identified by head pattern alone.

### Continued from page 1

elsewhere in the area report them as well. There is a form for reporting nests on the web site as well.

Finally for those interested in photography, if you have pictures of birds in Mecklenburg or the surrounding counties, they are needed to support the occurrence of the species. Birds on nest would be great but don’t disturb the nest! Here is a short list of photos needed – bufflehead, Cooper’s hawk, broad-winged hawk, kestrel, Bonaparte’s gull, herring gull, rock pigeon, mourning dove, chimney swift, kingfisher, red-headed woodpecker, yellow-bellied woodpecker, crow, white-breasted nuthatch, brown-headed nuthatch, starling, waxwing, chipping,

field, fox, and swamp sparrows, cardinal, red-winged blackbird, grackle, house finch, goldfinch and house sparrow. Check the web site for a longer list of needed photographs. When you send copies include a date and location for the picture. Pictures don’t have to be recent – I am submitting my Anna’s Hummingbird pictures from ‘98.

Although I have stressed birds, you can also use the Field Data Sheet to report butterflies, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and plants as well. For more information about this project contact Sudie Davis at 704-432-1391 or [davesse@co.Mecklenburg.nc.us] or 9401 Plaza Rd. Ext., Charlotte, NC 28215. Oh, they also need folks to enter the information into the database!

# Division of Natural Resources Department

## Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation



### Field Record Data Sheet

#### General Data:

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Observer(s): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Location/Property Name: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

#### Weather Data:

Year: \_\_\_\_\_ Temperature (F°) \_\_\_\_\_

Wind Code: \_\_\_\_\_ Wind Direction: \_\_\_\_\_

Sky Code: \_\_\_\_\_ Precip. Code: \_\_\_\_\_

**Wind Code:** 0 = smoke rises vertically; 1 = smoke moves; 2 = wind felt on face; 3 = leaves in constant motion; 4 = small branches in motion; 5 = small trees sway; 6 = above level 5

**Sky Code:** 0 = clear; 1 = scattered clouds; 2 = overcast; 3 = Fog

**Precipitation. Code:** 4 = drizzle; 5 = snow; 6 = showers; 7 = steady rain

#### Species/Habitat Data:

**Habitat Codes:** 1 = Deciduous Forest; 2 = Pine forest; 3 = agricultural field/pasture; 4 = marsh/bog/wetland; 5 = on the road; 6 = flying; 7 = prairie/native warm-season grassland; 8 = pond, lake or shoreline; 9 = creek/stream/streamside/floodplain; 10 = powerline row; 11 = near building/ ruderal garden/managed yard; 12 = old field/early succession scrub/shrubs; 13 = mixed pine-hardwood forest; 14 = late successional scrub; 15 = wetland forest; 16 = unknown

UTM E:

Species Name

UTM N:

# Individuals

Habitat Code:

UTM E:	UTM N:	Habitat Code:
Species Name	# Individuals	Habitat Code:
_____	_____	_____
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Please send form and photos to:  
Sudie Davis [davesse@co.Mecklenburg.nc.us] or 9401 Plaza Rd. Ext., Charlotte, NC 28215.

# Audubon News

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Mecklenburg Audubon is a chapter of National Audubon. Meetings are held at Sharon Seventh Day Adventist Church, 920 N. Sharon Amity Rd. on the first Thursday of each month, September – May at 7:30 PM.



## Who's New?!?

Sheldon Cantor  
Wanda Cole  
Bob Hubbard  
J. B. Jennings  
Michael & Nancy Kucera  
Jack Meckler  
Nancy Milling  
Cathy Ramsey  
Mr. & Mrs. Norfleet N. Smith  
Keith Thompson  
P.E. Whistler

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## ACTIVITIES CALENDAR

Thu. 4/1	– Wandering Warblers [Monthly Meeting]
Sat. 4/10	– Green Swamp Preserve [Full day field trip]
Sat. 4/10	– Redlair Farm [1/2 day field trip]
Sat. 4/18	– Audubon of North Carolina Meeting - Winston-Salem
Sat. 4/24	– McAlpine Greenway [1/2 day field trip]
Sun. 5/2	– Latta Park [1/2 day field trip]
Thu. 5/7	– Amazing Amphibians [Monthly Meeting]
Sat. 5/9	– International Migratory Bird Day



For additional activities and information go to <http://meckbirds.org>