

# Audubon News

January 2004

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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

# Eat, Drink and Travel to Texas

Plain Chachalaca



Great Kiskadee



Green Jay

*Since the first Thursday in January is New Years Day, we have moved the monthly meeting to the second Thursday, January 8th. That way everyone one will get to see their favorite bowl game.*

Now that the cold weather has set in our thoughts have turned to warmer climes. Especially places with lots of birds. Being cooped up also makes us yearn for wild places far and near. That's why we reserve our January meeting to spotlight places our members have been and would like to go even if it's only vicariously.

Yes, that means Member's 'slides' night and our annual Pot Luck dinner. To kick things off Terry Hamilton will regale us with pictures from her trip to Texas last year. Then anyone else who has brought slides or a CD with pictures can show off their stuff!!

Bring your pictures and your appetite! Please bring a travel cup for your drink. We are trying to cut back on the use of paper products.

**Dinner is at 6:30 PM** and the show begins at 7:30 PM. **Note we are meeting on Thursday, January 8th not New Years Day!!!!**

## Great Backyard Bird Count

Mark your calendars

February 13-16, 2004

Remember, we have a reputation to uphold!!





## 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, January 3rd: Pee Dee NWR Count**

The Pee Dee Christmas Count is a great way to start the new year birding. Every year it produces surprises. One year it was turkey tracks in the snow and lots of sparrows. Another sight to behold is seeing the ducks take off in the morning or watching them come back in at dusk. Because of the wide variety of habitat and its central location we usually have a good list of birds including Bald Eagles, Tundra Swans, and lots and lots of sparrows and ducks.

If you want to carpool, meet at the **McDonalds on Independence in the Windsor Square Shopping Center at 5:45 AM.** [Note: *this is a change from the December newsletter.*] Otherwise meet at the Pee Dee Maintenance Building [at the main entrance off Rt. 52] at 7 AM. Lunch will be provided but you will want to wear lots of layers and bring snack foods and something hot to drink while you are out in the field. If you want to be part of this exciting count contact Judy Walker [704-537-8181 or [birdwalker@mac.com](mailto:birdwalker@mac.com)].

### **Saturday, January 17th: Huntington Beach St. Park, Murrel's Inlet, SC**

Although January is often cold and dreary, Mecklenburg Audubon Society's annual field

trip to Huntington Beach State Park in South Carolina is always well worth braving the elements! A walk down the beach to the jetty can be cold and windy but you'll most likely get to see gannets, piping plovers and sometimes a flock of snow buntings! We can expect to see lots of ducks, shore birds and hopefully a few rare species like longspurs, eiders or long-tailed ducks.

Warm clothes and lunch are a must. Since most participants stay for the weekend, we will plan to go out to dinner on Saturday night. At dinner we will plan where we will go on Sunday.

Note: The Brookwood Inn is closed for January and February. The Comfort Inn [843-238-4233] and Days Inn [843-238-4444] in Surfside Beach and Litchfield Inn [1-800-637-4211] have good winter rates though.

If you plan to go contact Taylor Piephoff [704-532-6336 or [PiephoffT@aol.com](mailto:PiephoffT@aol.com)].

### **Friday, February 6th: Ribbon Walk Owl Prowl**

This field trip is being held in conjunction with Ribbon Walk. If you have not been to this gem just north of downtown Charlotte you are missing a treat. Barred owls nest in the old Beech trees and I am sure there is probably a Great Horned around somewhere.

We will meet at the entrance to the forest at 6:30 PM. [directions] We should be out about an hour to hour half. Depends on how cooperative the owls are. Remember to dress warmly. If you are interested in going contact Judy Walker [704-537-8181 or [birdwalker@mac.com](mailto:birdwalker@mac.com)].

### **Saturday, February 7th: Evergreen Preserve**

Evergreen Preserve anytime of the year is a wonderful place to bird. The new pond and surrounding wetland plants has been a great addition. Winter birding in the preserve will include a variety of sparrows, woodpeckers, and hawks. This year's Christmas count added a new mammal - coyote!

We will meet at the Winterfield School parking lot at 7:30 AM and should be done just about noon. Be prepared to walk about 2 miles. If you are planning to join us, contact Larry [[larry@lbarden.com](mailto:larry@lbarden.com)] or Louise [[louise@lbarden.com](mailto:louise@lbarden.com)] Barden at 704-535- 6385.

### **Saturday, February 21: Cowan's Ford Refuge**

Another great place to bird in the winter is Cowan's Ford Refuge. Ducks and sparrows will be on the list but just about anything can show up at this Important Bird Area.

We will meet in the parking lot at the viewing stand at 7:30 AM and should be done between 12 and 1 PM. There will be a lot of walking so remember to wear sturdy shoes. If you are interested in join this trip contact contact Judy Walker at 704-537-8181.

# For Those Going to the Beach: Shorebirds 101

Another excerpt from *The Complete Birder* by Jack Connor.

Five basic principles are especially important in shorebird identification:

*Learn habitat preferences.*

Like the 'song' in 'songbird', the 'shore' in 'shorebird' is something of a misnomer. Most shorebirds prefer marshes and wetlands to coastal shores and inland areas attract nearly as many species as saltwater areas. In fact, several species - upland and buff-breasted sandpipers, mountain and golden plovers, and others - are actually easier to find thousands of miles inland than near the ocean.

*Slow down and specialize.*

Shorebirding requires a radical change of pace from other forms of birdwatching. Since only a handful of shorebirds are identifiable at a glance, it's seldom possible to reel off a string of identifications without hesitation. Ordinarily, a lot of work is involved, and there is much time for doubt. Urgency and impatience are mortal sins, dogged persistence the cardinal virtue.

*Concentrate on standing birds.*

Shorebirds fly fast; several species can cruise at seventy miles per hour. They also tend to fly erratically and evasively, twisting and twirling against the sun, into shadow, back against the sun. A few species (willet, black-bellied plover and a couple of others) are best identified on the wing, and shore-

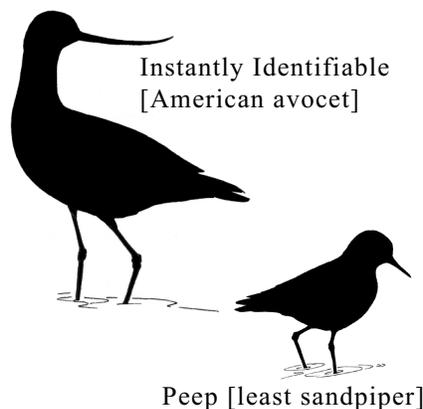
bird experts can identify almost all species in flight. As a rule of thumb, however, less experienced shorebirders need not concern themselves with flying birds. Shorebirds spend the majority of their time with their feet on the ground. For most of us one shorebird on the ground is worth ten in the air.

*Study the silhouettes. Postpone the plumages.*

Most shorebirds are better identified by their shapes than by their colors. Their light browns, creamy buffs, and subtle grays tend to wash out in the harsh light of the open areas they prefer. Even more important, the seasonal changes of shorebird feathering are complex and variable. All species have at least three visibly distinct plumages.

*Divide and conquer.*

Identifying shorebirds is a sorting operation. Here more than with any other group of birds, the process of elimination is the key technique.



## SIX CONVENIENT QUESTIONS FOR SORTING SHOREBIRDS

1. *Is it one of the instantly identifiable shorebirds?*

Oystercatcher, avocet, black-necked stilt.

2. *Is it a plover?*

The key components of plover silhouettes are: rounded, relatively thickish bills that are shorter than the length of its head; short necks; body lengths not much longer than body heights; and legs that appear roughly equal to the body heights. The plover silhouette is made of circles and soft curves.

3. *Is it one of the odd sandpipers?*

Five sandpipers are identified by their weird, eye-catching bills. The three *curl*ews have long, *curling* bills and two *godwits* - *God*, what bills they have - upswung, huge, and two-toned.

Three other odd sandpipers are made easy by their exclusive habitat preferences. The woodcock is the only shorebird to be found under a closed canopy in deep woods. Two phalaropes, the red and the red-necked, are the only shorebirds regularly found far offshore.

From this point onward, the questions become tougher, and the distinctions blur.

4. *Is it a peep?*

And most of the time most of us hope the answer is no. The term 'peep' is correctly applied to only six species, the sanderling and the five *Calidris* sandpipers that are smaller than the sanderling. They are clustered

together in all the field guides, but the fine distinctions required within the group make identifying the peeps one of the toughest problems in all birding. [See Connor's book for a detailed explanation of how to identify these birds.]

#### 5. *Is it a longlegs?*

Eleven sandpipers fit this description. They have legs that are noticeably longer than their body heights; body lengths noticeably longer than their body heights; and relatively straight bills that are at least as long as their head lengths and in most cases obviously longer. Most members of this group also have long necks and a *lanky* look. The lesser yellowlegs is typical.

#### 6. *Is it a plump?*

Ten midsized sandpipers have short necks and a *chunky* look. In specific contrast to the longlegs the plumps have legs that seem not noticeably longer and in many cases much shorter than body heights; body heights nearly equal to body lengths (excluding the wings); and bills of various shapes but most obviously curved or noticeably shorter than head length. The ruddy turnstone and purple sandpiper are typical plumps.

Since apparent leg length and body width can change with posture, "Longlegs or plump?" is sometimes a close judgement call, and a couple of species barely fit into one group or the other. All in all, however, distinguishing the two thematic shapes is much easier than sorting by size.

## HABITAT PREFERENCES OF MIGRATING/WINTERING SHOREBIRDS

*Only those species found regularly in the Carolinas are included here.*

*Sandy beaches:* Wilson's plover, piping plover, sanderling, dunlin, red knot

*Rocky shores and jetties:* purple sandpiper, ruddy turnstone,

*Coastal marshes and mud flats:* black-bellied plover, semipalmated plover, American oystercatcher, ruddy turnstone, red knot, semipalmated sandpiper, western sandpiper, black-necked stilt, American avocet, greater yellowlegs, lesser yellowlegs, willet, spotted sandpiper, marbled godwit, least sandpiper, dunlin, short-billed dowitcher, Wilson's snipe

*Inland, freshwater marshes, wet fields, and rain pools:* killdeer, greater yellowlegs, lesser yellowlegs, solitary sandpiper, spotted sandpiper, semipalmated sandpiper, western sandpiper, least sandpiper, Baird's sandpiper, pectoral sandpiper, buff-breasted sandpiper, Wilson's snipe

*Edges of freshwater rivers, large ponds and deeper lakes:* killdeer, greater yellowlegs, lesser yellowlegs, solitary sandpiper, spotted sandpiper

*Inland areas without water* [prairies, meadows, sod farms, plowed fields, airports]: lesser golden plover, killdeer, upland sandpiper, buff-breasted sandpiper

*Deep, wet woodlands:* woodcock

## SORTING SHOREBIRDS

*Instantly identifiable:* American oystercatcher, American Avocet, black-necked stilt

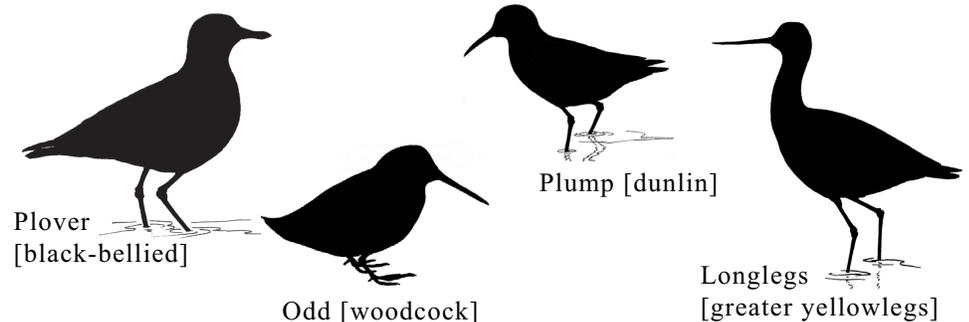
*Plovers:* killdeer, Wilson's, semipalmated, piping, black-bellied, American golden.

*Odd sandpipers:* long-billed curlew, whimbrel, marbled godwit, woodcock

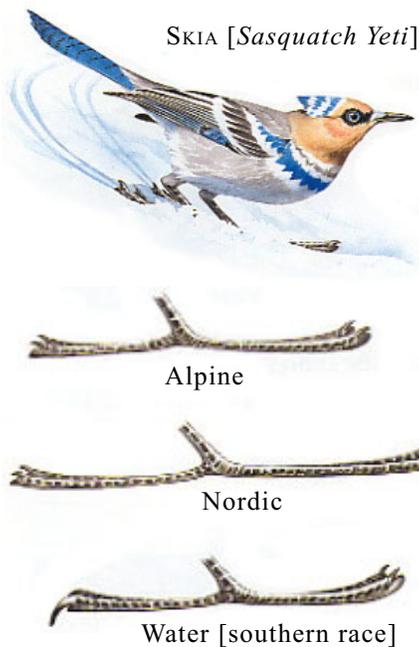
*Peeps:* sanderling, white-rumped, Baird's semipalmated, western, least

*Longlegs:* willet, upland sandpiper, greater yellowlegs, lesser yellowlegs, Wilson's snipe, long-billed dowitcher, short-billed dowitcher, solitary sandpiper, stilt sandpiper

*Plumps:* red knot, ruddy turnstone, purple sandpiper, buff-breasted sandpiper, dunlin, pectoral sandpiper, spotted sandpiper



# Have You Seen these Birds?



## SKIA [*SASQUATCH YETI*]

This big footed bird of shores, lakes and mountains was once widespread in North America, but has now been fragmented into several subspecies. The northeastern, or Nordic race migrates cross-country, while the northwestern, or Alpine subspecies migrates downhill. The southern subspecies is restricted to open water. The Skia is an interesting bird to observe in flight. Concentrations seem to occur in Calgary, Alberta, and in Lake Placid, New York.

**OBSERVATION HINT:** In winter, Skias are often seen from chair lifts and rope tows.

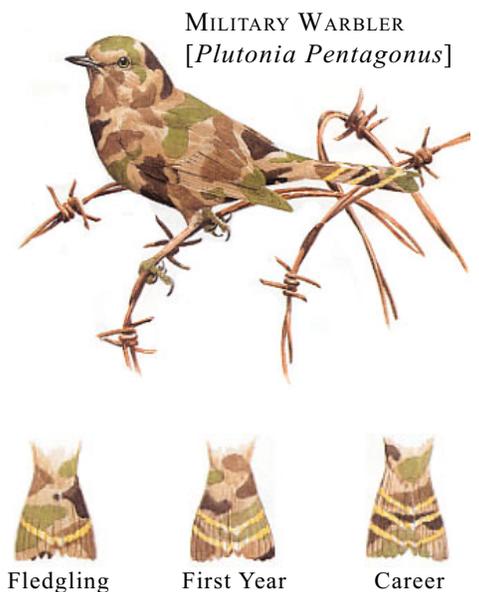
**IDENTIFICATION AID:** The various races can be separated by the foot length, although the southern subspecies is difficult to track.

## MILITARY WARBLER [*PLUTONIA PENTAGONUS*]

This small, elusive warbler is difficult to find, since it feeds in dense thickets. Apparently evolving as a mutant from early nuclear tests, this bird is now common only on widely-scattered, high-security military bases. Call is a bugled “you can’t get ‘em up, you can’t get ‘em up, you can’t get ‘em up in the morning.” The tail pattern indicates some sort of social rank.

**OBSERVATION HINT:** Since access to high-security installations is not possible, it is necessary to sneak onto the base. In addition, the Military Warbler is so well camouflaged that it cannot readily be seen. This fact is sufficient proof to list the bird. The young may sometimes be attracted to C-rations.

**SPECIALIZED TRAINING:** Must be able to do the 50-yard belly crawl in less than 40 seconds.



If you have, either someone has put a little something extra in the coffee you use to keep warm while birding or you have been reading a wonderfully, hilarious book by Ben, Cathryn, and John Sill called *A Field Guide to Little-known and Seldom-seen Birds of North America*. This tongue-in-cheek tome captures the essence of birding and bird watching. And it will keep you chuckling for a long time after reading. In fact, you will swear you have seen some of these birds in the wild. If one volume isn't enough to keeping you laughing, try the sequels - *Another Field Guide to Little-known and Seldom-seen Birds of North America* and *Beyond Birdwatching: More Than There is to Know About Birding*. Soon you will be creating your own field guide.

PS: All of the Sills are excellent birders. Cathryn writes children's nature books. And you have seen John's illustrations in the Stokes series on Bird Behavior.

# 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.

## Monthly Meeting Date Change

### Thursday, January 8th!!!!

Dinner at 6:30 PM

Program at 7:30 PM

Since the first Thursday in January is New Years Day, we have moved the monthly meeting to the second Thursday. That way everyone one will get to see their favorite bowl game.

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## ACTIVITIES CALENDAR

Sat. 1/3	– Pee Dee Christmas Count
Thu. 1/8	– Eat, Drink and travel to Texas [Montly Meeting]
Sat. 1/17	– Huntington Beach St. Park, SC [All Day]
Sat. 1/30	– Carolina Bird Club Weekend
Thu. 2/5	– By Golly Gulls [Monthly Meeting, rescheduled from December]
Fri. 2/6	– Owl Prowl at Ribbon Walk
Sat. 2/7	– Evergreen Preserve [1/2 day field trip]
Sat. 2/21	– Cowan's Ford Refuge [1/2 day field trip]
Thu. 3/4	– Traveling Birder: New Zealand [Monthly Meeting]



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