

THE BULLETIN

Chapel Hill Bird Club

May 2004

(Vol. XXXIII, No. 5)

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

Next meeting – eat, vote May 17 picnic, elections

The May 17 picnic will be our last meeting of the spring. (We resume meeting September 26.) Along with the traditional potluck picnic, we'll hold our annual election of officers. New this year will be a bird walk (we hope) to be led by Doug Shadwick. So here's the drill: bring a dish you can share, a beverage for yourself, and your own plate and utensils (to minimize throwaways). The food has been great the last three years, and we usually keep a list of picnic birds. Be there! (Sure, bring a guest. This is free, it's casual, and all are welcome.). Time: 6:30 pm.

Location: Ebenezer Point state recreation area at Jordan Lake. Ebenezer is on SR 1008 (aka Mt. Carmel Church Rd./Farrington Rd. /Beaver Creek Rd.). Ebenezer Point is 2.3 miles south of Hwy. 64 (Wilsonville). There's a sign marking the entrance. From SR 1008, turn right onto the main park road and follow it all the way to the end (the point). There are picnic tables under a shelter and restrooms nearby. Admittance is free on a weekday night this time of year.

Slate of officers: At this time it looks as though the slate will comprise our current officers, who are willing to continue: president, Joe Bearden; vice-president RDU, Karen Bearden; vice-president Chapel Hill, Judy Murray; secretary, Amalie Tuffin; treasurer, Ruth Roberson.

Thanks to you!

Thanks to all you members who either joined the CHBC this year or renewed your membership. We have a strong club – good field trips and programs, lots of camaraderie, lots of participation, and, above all, an abiding interest in birds. So have a great summer. Hope to see you next fall.

And thanks to the refreshers

Refreshments before meetings are provided by volunteers – bless them! This year they were Julia Guo, Julia Shields, Ruth Roberson, Laura Lewis-Tuffin, Sue Covalla and Kara Reichart. The refreshments chairperson, who recruits folks, is Karen Piplani. Thank you all. Let's do it again next year.

UNC campus owls, yes!

Rob Gluck reported at our 4/26 meeting that the male Barred Owl is bringing food to the nest in an oak on the front quad (McCorkle Place) at UNC. The owls have used this tree for the last several years but got a late start

nesting this year. Rob thinks the youngsters will emerge about the fourth week of May, and he plans to lead a couple of owl walks to see them, possibly on Memorial Day weekend and the weekend after that. He'll post a notice on Carolinabirds. If you're not subscribed, you can email Rob for information: thrush@hotmail.com. Or call him: 967-3134.

Serendipity and the Least Bittern

by Bruce Young, to Carolinabirds, 4/26

Four of us took a trip down to Sunset Beach and Green Swamp on Saturday [4/24, Bruce, Doug Shadwick, Rick Payne, Bob Rybcinski]. We found approximately 120 species during the day, of which the best sighting was indisputably a Least Bittern. We arrived at the west end of Sunset beach around 7 a.m., parked in the few free spaces, and walked the beach. When we got back it was about 9:30 and we stopped for a quick look at the marsh just over the wall at the end of the road. We had been looking for a couple of minutes and were getting ready to go when we heard a low grunting coming from the reeds. Not 30 feet away, at the top of some reeds was a least bittern singing his mating "song". We scurried to see him, but he didn't go anywhere. We were able to get long scope looks at him that were so close we could have given him an eye exam. One characteristic we noted was the scarlet red color of the lores, that we assumed was a mark of "high breeding 'plumage'" that is found in many ardeids. This feature is not depicted or described in any of the typical field guides; I had to go to Howell's Birds of Mexico to find any note of this. So, not only was my life Least Bittern a perfect view that lasted for as long as I felt like looking, the bird was showing a beautiful feature that only lasts for a few weeks a year and singing his mating song. Certainly worth getting up at 2:00 a.m. for.

Watching Parkway Peregrines

by G. Travis/Reece Mitchell/David Rupp

Every year for the last four, Reece Mitchell of Flat Rock, NC has posted the status of Peregrine Falcons breeding at one of the most watchable sites in North Carolina, a cliff opposite the parking lot at Devil's Courthouse on the Blue Ridge Parkway, milepost 422. I stopped there on summer vacation year before last, but in mid-July I was too late. The falcons had flown. However, I did find what I thought was the nest site in a diagonal crack in the cliff

face. (Look for whitewash and you might find the nest site just above it.)

Here's Reece's April 12, 2004 report: "The pair of Peregrine Falcons at Devil's Courthouse are late in breeding this year. They are still in courtship, perhaps eggs are being laid, but they are not incubating. The female is spending some time on the cliff facing the parking lot and the male is bringing food to her. There is still plenty of time for them to breed successfully this year, but most of the other pairs in Western N.C. are incubating or feeding young now. Devil's Courthouse is at mile 422 on the Blue Ridge Parkway. The best place to watch is from the parking lot. The eyrie is near the middle of the cliff in a niche that contains the remnants of a raven's nest. Best viewing is afternoon when the sun shines on the cliff face."

And from David Rupp, April 29: "I spent some time yesterday watching the pair of Peregrine Falcons at Devil's Courthouse on the Blue Ridge Parkway. They are now incubating. The highlight of the day was an adult Golden Eagle that the male Peregrine chased away."

Good luck if you go!

Worth getting up for (a little lake magic)

by Ginger Travis

Sunday, May 2: I ignored my alarm clock at 5:50 a.m. Why get up and count birds in the rain? I had stood in the rain for 4 hours on Saturday afternoon on the local farm tour. Enough! I lay in bed and thought things over. What if I didn't go out to Jordan Lake with my kayak for the spring count? Would Norm Budnitz (the compiler) think less of me? Would Carol Williamson (the organizer)? Hmmmm. They've probably counted in gale force winds, not to mention blinding rain. Maybe even plagues of locusts. I couldn't wiggle out of it. Of course they'd think less of me. They'd think I was a wimp. And they'd be right!

So I got out of bed. It wasn't really raining, just dark, dark, dark. Made coffee, threw caution to the winds and drank two cups. Finally put on rain jacket and hat for first option – staying dry; also polypro shirt and nylon pants for second option – staying warm even if wet. Then packed boat paraphernalia in the truck, including new, fully waterproof spray skirt. I launched my kayak at the fishing pier parking lot at Bell's Chapel on the White Oak Creek arm of Jordan Lake. (Illegal. Don't try this!) No rain yet. This wasn't so bad. First bird heard – Eastern Kingbird – a good one! And 20 Cliff Swallows swarmed out from under the Farrington Rd. bridge. Then the heavens poured. Steady rain for the next hour. Hardly any birds calling. The few I heard I couldn't write down in the rain, so I memorized strings of names by chanting them to myself over and over: Great Blue, Great Crested, two tits, one chick, one gnat, one dove.

And then, suddenly, the rain stopped. Birds actually sang. A harsh two-note call made me look up. Three Purple Martins – cool! A lone brownish swallow dipped low over the water, then flew out of sight along the shore and didn't reappear. Why not? I IDed it as a Northern Rough-winged and paddled over to look at the bank. And there was the nest hole – a little larger than I'd

expected and located in a clean clay face above bedrock. Several yards offshore I lined up my kayak with the entrance and looked in the hole with binoculars. Saw sticks or stems about a foot inside and a shadowy figure I took to be the female incubating. My first-ever Northern Rough-winged nest! Very cool. And eagles soared – and sat. Better and better. My first Bald Eagle of the day was an immature perched in a shoreline pine east of Crosswinds campground – a youngster with a dark Osprey-like eyestripe. Third-year? I thought so, but the book was at home. I made notes. Another eagle soaring, this one with tons of white on the front and under wings – not young-of-the-year, I thought. Also not the age of the first eagle. Maybe second-year? Made notes. Then, scanning the far shore with binoculars I saw two white heads – adult eagles perched in pines about 75 yards apart. Four individuals already! Onward. Up to willow flats at the end of the lake near Hwy 751.

Then I saw the eagle's nest, as obvious as you please, back in the beaver impoundment just downstream from the highway. New nest tree, replacing last year's nest tree that blew down in the late summer or early fall. This one is in the top of a dead pine that retains all its bark. Nothing in the nest. Well, young eagles should have fledged by now. And there sitting on a snag near the nest, a beautiful, calm adult. Not far away, the other – both, I assume, the adult birds I had earlier seen down the shore. It was very quiet in the impoundment – not even much traffic on nearby 751. I hardly moved, to avoid scaring the eagles. And finally, overhead, one more immature eagle soaring high on wings with a sawtooth trailing edge – the very uneven flight feathers of a one-year-old bird. Come down here!, I said. But it just soared away across Hwy. 751 and up the creek. And suddenly, right over my shoulder, came another immature eagle, low and close, then rising and circling the impoundment, and perching 100 yards from the adults. Very dark back. Not much white, at least that I could notice. Maybe this year's youngster? (Last year at this time, there were two fledglings in the impoundment, and I watched them fly from snag to snag and hop up and down on the old nest.)

I had pulled my kayak up over two beaver dams to get into the impoundment to see these birds -- and more: a pair of Great Egrets, one with the grass-green lores of a breeding adult. Wood ducks. Electric blue Tree Swallows and dark Barn Swallows zipping, diving, here, then gone – how do you count them accurately? Red-headed Woodpeckers. A Red-shouldered Hawk. And profound calm on several acres of still water, sheltered from the rising wind. A beaver swam right past my boat carrying a mouthful of something – dried grass? A Canada Goose sat on the beaver lodge – on eggs, I assume. None of the birds took fright. Nothing flew. I drifted, watched and savored.

So much for my early-morning doubts. You never know what you will find till you get up, go out and look.