



# Wingbars

A Quarterly Publication of Georgia Audubon

NOVEMBER 2020



**GEORGIA  
AUDUBON**

## Our Work Continues: Georgia Audubon Takes Steps to Conserve Birds Across Georgia

*By Dottie Head, Director of Communications*

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Wingbars is the official newsletter of Georgia Audubon and is published four times a year. We feature news, upcoming events, meetings, field trips, and projects. We hope you will join us. Opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect policies of Georgia Audubon.

Cover photo: Ruby-crowned Kinglet  
by Ronald Newhouse

In the three short months since announcing that Atlanta Audubon has become Georgia Audubon, we've received many positive e-mails, comments, and rave reviews about our new statewide reach and our new look and logo. Thank you to everyone who reached out! Even though we're all still working from home, we have made tremendous progress as a statewide organization, building new partnerships and adding capacity to do more good for Georgia birds—from the mountains, to the coast, and everywhere in between.

Among our accomplishments:

- As part of our goal to make birds and birding safe and accessible for all people, we recently hired Corina Newsome, one of the organizers of the Black Birders Week movement, as the new Community Engagement Manager. In this role, Corina will work with Georgia Audubon's senior leadership to cultivate strategies and deliver programs that engage diverse communities from across Georgia in the enjoyment and conservation of birds. Corina has hit the ground running and has been busy building partnerships that will allow Georgia Audubon to introduce more diverse audiences to our events and programs.
- Through a unique partnership between Georgia Audubon, the Jekyll Island Authority, and the Georgia Sea Grant, we recently welcomed Sergio Sabat-Bonilla as the new Coastal Sea Grant Fellow. Headquartered on Jekyll Island, the Sea Grant Fellow will develop programs that engage and activate local communities, specifically the BIPOC communities of Glynn and McIntosh Counties, and develop a replicable, inclusive community strategy that brings conservation, birdwatching, and community science to the public. He will also participate in bird monitoring activities, including habitat monitoring, bird banding, and other field work.
- We've established a partnership with Oconee Rivers Audubon Society (ORAS), in Athens, to merge our two successful Wildlife Sanctuary Programs into a single program that will allow us expand the number of certified habitats across north Georgia, including hosting two successful volunteer trainings to train additional volunteers to certify properties in the metro Atlanta and Athens area. We also collaborated with ORAS on our Fall Native Plant Sale by offering pickup locations in both Atlanta and Athens. It was our most successful native plant sale to date, with nearly 1,100 plants sold!

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From the Executive Director

# Flocking Together for Georgia's Birds

As we near the end of this crazy year, I take a lot of pride in the progress that we have made as an organization, and I see a bright future for Georgia Audubon. When I joined Atlanta Audubon, now Georgia Audubon, just over a year ago, it was immediately clear that more specific and focused work was needed to tackle the challenges facing Georgia's birds. With the startling report last fall of more than three billion birds lost over the past several decades, it was time to take a bigger step forward. Like a fledgling stepping off the nest and into the air for the first time, it took planning, practice and a leap of faith—from the Board of Directors, the staff, and from our members and partners—but we've succeeded! As Georgia Audubon, we've taken a huge step to build new partnerships and strengthen existing ones that will allow us to build places where birds and people thrive across Georgia.

Our recently adopted Strategic Plan lays out ambitious goals to guide our work as Georgia Audubon over the next three years and beyond. Our work spanning nearly five decades has produced science-based and community-supported programming with proven solutions for birds, habitats, and communities. During the next three years, Georgia Audubon will focus on scaling out our existing programming across the state, as well as increasing capacity and resources for conservation and environmental education work that is critically needed in Georgia. Our key goals include:

- Increase and protect bird populations and healthy habitats in Georgia.
- Create a diverse group of environmental stewards and professional educators in Georgia.
- Engage and collaborate with communities throughout Georgia to connect people with birds.

In the past 18 months, a group of generous members and supporters has committed \$500,000 in support of our expanded vision to create a conservation-minded Georgia that values and appreciates the important functions that birds and other wildlife play in our shared ecosystems. These critical dollars have already helped accomplish so much for conservation in Georgia. As we flock together, the more we can accomplish.

We all know that where birds thrive, people thrive. Our health is intertwined, and as Georgia Audubon we have the opportunity to set an example for bird-friendly communities everywhere. We are committed to using our strong conservation, education, and community engagement programs to achieve much more for our environment and for the state of Georgia. This elevated platform will allow us to bring more people into the Georgia Audubon flock and to enhance our ability to protect local wildlife, preserve Georgia's unique habitats, and conserve the vibrant landscapes that have endured for centuries across the state.



Georgia Audubon has continued to thrive during this difficult year. Pictured here are staff and volunteers at the recent Fall Native Plant Sale plant pickup.



Jared Teutsch

As we approach the holiday season, I'd like to thank each of you for your continued support. I hope you'll volunteer, attend our events, and join us as we flock together to build places where birds and people thrive from the mountains to the coast, and everywhere in between.

# What Does Nature Have to Tell Us About Community?

By Corina Newsome, Community Engagement Manager

I've been thinking about community a lot lately. I, along with many of you, am feeling the effects of the extended physical isolation, making us long for closeness with others more than usual. I also recently took the new position of Community Engagement Manager here at Georgia Audubon, a job centered around connecting, building, and enriching communities of people around a common goal: building places where birds and people thrive.

I'm also a scientist. I ask questions about the natural world and go to great lengths to find patterns that shed light on the answers. In those efforts, I've witnessed just how many problems for which nature has created its own solutions. However, those solutions haven't stopped at providing behavioral or morphological survival adaptations for the species which possess them—humans have started to key in on nature's playbook that is millions of years in the making.

Biomimicry, defined by the Biomimicry Institute as the "practice that learns from and mimics the strategies found in nature to solve human design problems," has brought about some of the greatest advances in human technology. In the energy sector, the physical shapes of maple seeds and kingfishers provided the blueprint for harnessing wind energy. In the agricultural industry, food production has been maximized by learning from the natural growth pattern of prairies. Termite mounds have helped inform sustainable architecture. Mosquitoes' adaptations for blood extraction have informed new technologies for medical equipment. There are countless examples of how nature has directly informed the ways we optimize our structures and operations across disciplines.

Humans are facing challenges that we have no real precedent for solving. Our solutions must address energy, food, and medicine, along with many other dimensions of human survival. But there's one dimension that encompasses them all—community. Every solution we craft, every plan we implement, is done so by people and for people, by communities and for communities. This necessarily begs the question: What can nature tell us about the best ways we should live, work, and problem solve in community? As you might guess, nature has quite a lot to tell us.

Billy Almon, a friend and incredible scientist and science storyteller specializing in biomimicry, recently shared some of the most profound insights I have heard regarding this question, and looked to the birds for the answers. During a talk earlier this year for the 100Kin10 Summit, Billy dove deep into the science of murmurations, a phenomenon seen in European Starlings. Anywhere between hundreds and tens of thousands of birds will fly together in highly coordinated formation. The problem they are trying to solve? Avoiding predation by a raptor that is threatening



*A flock of Common Grackles and Red-winged Blackbirds.  
Photo by Marlene Koslowsky.*

the flock. They fly in extremely close proximity to one another, turning on a dime to accomplish this feat.

How do they do it, and what can we learn from them? Billy described two major elements of flock dynamics during a murmuration that were particularly applicable to human communities. First, he explained that there is never a single bird that leads the flock's direction for the entire duration of the murmuration. Different birds will take the lead depending on a number of factors, such as familiarity with the location. This allows the flock to move dynamically and nearly instantaneously. This element of flock coordination was particularly profound and has direct implications for communities collectively responding to problems. The ability to surrender leadership when another person's strengths and perspectives are best suited to lead in a given moment gives that community the ability to respond quickly and most efficiently to the needs at hand; such agility can be crucial in times of crisis.

The second murmuration characteristic Billy described is that these large flocks of starlings are made up of individuals who are all responding and paying the most attention to the movement of birds closest to them. This allows for the accumulation of smaller, precise movements that produce the beautiful, fluid progression of the flock as whole. I have begun to understand now more than ever the importance of knowing and responding to the needs of the communities immediately around me. In a society of stark divides, whether they be socioeconomic, racial, or of other natures, people can live completely unaware of the state of their own neighbors, being most drawn to solving problems far away. I can only imagine the kind of large-scale progress we could achieve by building relationships with and addressing the needs of the people in our own communities.

*(Continued on Page 7)*

# VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT On Stephen Ramsden

By Steve Phenicie

*(This is the 47th in a series on Georgia Audubon volunteers, board members, and staff.)*

You might be able to recognize the man by his birding equipment—a 600-millimeter Canon camera that weighs 45 pounds and tends to attract considerable attention on bird walks. When he got interested in birding, Stephen Ramsden bought the best camera, lens, and tripod he could “because I’m not cheap.”

Stephen started birding only about 10 years ago after he took up hiking and noticed the birds he saw along the way. He then joined Audubon, got chummy with the staff, took the Master Birder class, learned all he could, and loved what he was doing. “Atlanta Audubon helped me become legitimate,” he says. Eventually he began leading bird walks and has contributed to several of the virtual ones during the COVID-19 pandemic, reporting from Clyde Shepherd Nature Preserve as well as the deck of his own home.

Several years ago he spoke at an Atlanta Audubon meeting on “Solar Spectroscopy: The Nature of Light and How It Affects Wildlife Watching and Imaging,” which brings us to another one of Stephen’s passions—the sun. Stephen is founder of the world’s largest solar astronomy outreach program, The Charlie Bates Solar Astronomy Project. The program operates in 27 countries around the world and in every U.S. state, reaching roughly 300,000 people yearly. He’s especially enthusiastic about what the program has done in the poor countries of North Africa, Central America, and Eastern Europe. Stephen personally takes his solar astronomy gear to 70 or 80 schools a year to introduce students—mainly middle schoolers—to high-tech science and encourage them to pursue careers in

space exploration and research. He has also launched an organization called Sunlit Earth, a nonprofit that emphasizes the sun’s effect on living terrestrial systems.

Stephen’s interest in astronomy dates to 1970, when his mother bought him his first telescope, which he promptly destroyed while looking at the sun. He also looks at the sky at night, of course, but asks, “Why look out at a star 6,000 light years away

when you have one right around the corner?” He also notes that giving presentations on the sun is easier at schools because he can do in the daytime.

Stephen is also active in the locally-based animal rescue group AWARE and is often sent out to see what he can do for an animal in distress. He notes, however, that such work is often more glamorous in theory than in reality because the vast majority of injured animals are already too far gone to survive. He sometimes takes solace,

however, in helping an animal have a peaceful death rather than being torn apart by a predator.

Stephen is a native of Atlanta and attended Georgia State, Clayton State, and Georgia Southern, although he never earned a degree because he was offered a position as an air traffic controller, his occupation for 25 years. (His solar astronomy project is named for a deceased colleague.) He also served in the U.S. Navy. His writings have been published in numerous places, his nature photographs are free to anyone who asks, and he has reaped too many scientific and other honors to be listed here. Stephen and his wife, Natalie, an attorney, and their dog live in Virginia-Highland.



*Stephen Ramsden films Bald Eagles on iced-over Lake Peachtree in Peachtree City. Photo by Kevin Gaston.*

# THANK YOU!

## A Million Thanks...

... to **Kelly Bryan, Maureen Carroll, Cheryl Hensley, Mary Kimberly, Gavin MacDonald, and Linda Keleher** for helping with Project Safe Flight Georgia ... to **Valerie and James McMullian** for help with bird monitoring at our restoration sites ... to **Dottie Head** for doing such a marvelous job with the technology during the pandemic so that such things as the book club, the webinars, and the virtual bird walks run well ... to **Jay Davis** for his assistance with website transitions for the new Georgia Audubon ... to our guest Virtual Bird Walk Leaders, **Jason Ward, Abby Sterling, and Stephen Ramsden** ... to **David Sibley, Kathryn Zuckerman, and Amy Hagedorn** for working with us on the recent David Sibley Webinar ... to **Doug Tallamy** for an inspiring presentation on native plants in our landscapes ... to **Doug Robinson** at Eagle Eye Books for partnering with us on the Tallamy and Sibley events ... to **Kathie Entz and Donna Reshetnichenko** with Albany Audubon Society for the wonderful article on Donnie Lanier, Albany’s Bluebird Man ... to **Laura Adams and Stephen Ramsden** for hosting our Virtual Swift Night Out event ... to our Georgia Bird Fest event leaders: **Gabe Andrie, Adam Betuel, Eric Bowles, Marcy Breffle, Richard Candler, Jay Davis, Andrew Dreelin,**

# Species Profile: The Red-headed Woodpecker

By Steve Phenicie

**The Red-headed Woodpecker is no longer just another handsome bird on your checklist. When Atlanta Audubon became Georgia Audubon, it adopted the bird for its chapter logo.**

Why the honor? The woodpecker, with its crimson head, snow-white body, and half white, half inky black wings, is found across Georgia in rural, suburban, and urban settings. It is also a bird that was identified as most at-risk in National Audubon's recent report, "Survival by Degrees: 389 Species on the Brink." The report builds on the 2014 Birds and Climate Change Report using the latest climate science research methods and modeling to capture a deeper, more extensive analysis of the effects of climate change on North American birds. This woodpecker fiercely defends its territory, mirroring the commitment that Georgia Audubon brings to protecting birds and habitat, educating the public, and engaging communities in its work. You'll note that the logo woodpecker is perched on an oak branch to signify the important connection between native plants and birds.

Adam Betuel, Georgia Audubon's conservation director, says that the status of the bird is a bit complicated. In certain regions it is increasing while in others it is declining. Birds in the Piedmont seem to be doing well while populations farther north and in parts of the Midwest and Great Plains are dropping fast. "This species has had a history of increases and decreases, and I think that has made it more difficult for researchers to accurately determine what is happening now and if it is something to be really concerned about or a natural dip (I doubt it's natural, but that's just my gut feeling)," he says.

Why the population drop? In urban areas, a possible reason is the removal of dead trees and branches. In rural areas, experts list many possible causes: the loss of nesting habitat due to firewood cutting, clear-cutting, agricultural intensification, channeling of rivers, reforestation of the eastern U.S., loss of small orchards, loss of chestnuts, decline of oak-savanna habitat, fire suppression during the 20th

century, a switch to "cleaner" farming practices, and competition from starlings for roosting cavities.

The Red-headed Woodpecker is one of eight woodpecker species in Georgia, and it can be found, to one degree or another, over much of the country east of the Rocky Mountains. For habitat, it prefers groves, farm country, orchards, shade trees in towns, large scattered trees, and forest edges. It avoids unbroken forest.

To breed, a male will establish a territory and advertise he's there by calling and drumming. His winter roosting cavity may be used for a nest, or a new cavity may be excavated; the female indicates acceptance of the site by tapping on the tree. The nest cavity is in a bare dead tree or dead limb, from a few feet above ground to 65 feet or even higher.

The female usually lays four or five white eggs, although that can run as high as seven. Parents share the incubation for 12 or 13 days, and the young are fed by both adult birds. They leave the nest at about 27-31 days, and pairs may start on a second nesting attempt while still feeding the fledglings from the first.

The bird's diet includes insects, spiders, earthworms, nuts, seeds, berries, wild and cultivated fruit (including apples, pears, cherries, blackberries, raspberries, strawberries, grapes, mulberries, and poison ivy fruits), and occasionally small rodents. They sometimes visit feeders in winter, especially suet, and will eat eggs and nestlings of other birds as well as bark. Unlike other woodpeckers, the Red-headed Woodpeckers are good at catching insects in the air, but this can lead to fatal collisions with cars along roadsides.

If you want to search for them in metro Atlanta, try Grant Park, Decatur Cemetery, and the Noonday Creek Trail in Cobb County. Farther afield, you might see them at Piedmont National Refuge near Juliette, Sprewell Bluff near Manchester, and in the Okefenokee Swamp.



Red-headed Woodpecker, by Dan Vickers.

# THANK YOU!

## A Million Thanks...

*(Continued from Page 4)*

**Shannon Fair, Nathan Farnau, Melanie Furr, Peter Gordon, Roseanne Guerra, Wes Hatch, Malcolm Hodges, Ellen Honeycutt, Gus Kaufman, Christy Knight, Patrick Maurice, Rob McDonough, Stephen Ramsden, Georgann Schmalz, Iris Schumacher, Jamie Vidich, and Lauren Wilson**

... to our Georgia Bird Fest volunteer Ambassadors: **Gabe Andrie, Toni Bowen, Joy Carter, Beverly Fooks, Michelle Hamner, Dottie Head, Kimberly Johnson, Judy Killeen, Trish Killian, Leigh Layton, Mary Nevil, Margaret Stephen, Susan Talburt, Jared Teutsch, Lillie Kline, and Cindy Wolfe** ... to the **Avian Advocate volunteers** who have been certifying Sanctuaries during this difficult time ... to volunteer field trips leaders **Jason Ward, Jay Davis, Anne McCallum, Iris Schumacher, Gus Kaufman, Jamie Vidich, and Roseanne Guerra.**

# Flocking Together for Georgia's Birds

Help us meet our goal by December 31

We're wrapping up our Flocking Together Campaign with the goal to raise at least \$50,000 to support bird-friendly conservation, education, and community engagement throughout the state. We're close to meeting our goal, but we need your help! Please make your gift before December 31. Donations will support habitat restoration, STEM-based education, certification of additional wildlife sanctuaries, coastal bird monitoring, and strengthening the Audubon network throughout the state. To support our new statewide work, donors who make gifts of \$159 or more (in celebration of Georgia's 159 counties) will receive a new Georgia Audubon cap as a special thank you. To donate, please visit [www.georgiaaudubon.org/appeal](http://www.georgiaaudubon.org/appeal) before December 31. Together, we're building places where birds and people thrive. Thank you for your support.



## Corina Newsome Joins Georgia Audubon as New Community Engagement Manager

Georgia Audubon recently announced the hiring of Corina Newsome, one of the organizers of the Black Birders Week movement, as the new Community Engagement Manager. In this role, Newsome will work in collaboration with Georgia Audubon's senior leadership to cultivate strategies and deliver programs that engage diverse communities from across Georgia in the enjoyment and conservation of birds.

"We are delighted to welcome Corina to Georgia Audubon and are eager to begin working to break down barriers that make it difficult for BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and other underserved communities to access birding and the outdoors," says Executive Director Jared Teutsch. "Georgia Audubon is committed to making birding more equitable and inclusive for all people.



Bringing Corina on board as our new Community Engagement Manager is the first step in our efforts to seek out, listen to and learn from, incorporate, and engage voices of more diverse birders in our membership and programs."

Newsome was one of the organizers of Black Birders Week, a five-day virtual event that was fledged earlier this year in response to the Christian Cooper incident in New York's Central Park. Black Birders Week was created to counter the narrative that the outdoors are not the place Black people should be, to educate the birding and outdoor-loving community about the challenges that Black birders face, and to encourage increased diversity in birds and conservation.

Having experienced the hurdles faced by people of color interested in wildlife careers, Newsome has founded several programs to encourage young people from underrepresented demographics to consider careers in wildlife sciences. According to Newsome, her ultimate goal is to eliminate the systemic barriers that have prevented marginalized people groups from participating in wildlife conservation and exploration of the great outdoors.

Newsome comes to Georgia Audubon from Georgia Southern University, where she is completing her Master of Science degree with a focus on avian conservation. Her master's research focuses on conservation measures for the MacGillivray's Seaside Sparrow. She began her wildlife career as a zookeeper and earned a B.A. in Zoo and Wildlife Biology from Malone University in Canton, Ohio.

# Sea Grant Fellow Added to Georgia Audubon Staff to Add Coastal Capacity

Georgia Audubon recently welcomed Sergio Sabat-Bonilla as the new Coastal Sea Grant Fellow. The position is the culmination of a partnership between Georgia Audubon, the Jekyll Island Authority, and the Georgia Sea Grant.

Headquartered on Jekyll Island, the Sea Grant Fellow will develop programs that engage and activate local communities, specifically the BIPOC communities of Glynn and McIntosh Counties, and develop a replicable, inclusive community strategy that brings conservation, birdwatching, and community science to the public. He will also participate in bird monitoring activities, including habitat monitoring, bird banding, and other field work.

“Georgia Audubon is eager to expand our capacity on the coast and the addition of a Sea Grant Fellow position is a tremendous start,” says Jared Teutsch, Georgia Audubon executive director. “In this position, Sergio will be working with other coastal conservation organizations to bolster shorebird conservation efforts and to reach out and engage with diverse communities to introduce them to the wonder and joy of birds.”

A native of Puerto Rico, Sabat-Bonilla has a B.S. in Biology from the University of Central Oklahoma. He is currently a master’s student at Georgia Southern University, where he is studying how aquatic macroinvertebrate communities respond to hydrological variations in wetlands as expected from climate change models.



*Sergio Sabat-Bonilla joins Georgia Audubon as the new Sea Grant Fellow.*

## Our Work Continues *(Continued from Page 1)*

- In addition, Georgia Audubon is partnering with Ogeechee Audubon Society in Macon to host the popular Master Birder Class in Macon as well as in Atlanta. We will be offering virtual classes for the combined groups in addition to weekend field trips in both the Atlanta and Macon areas.
- We’ve joined the Okefenokee Protection Alliance and the Horseshoe Crab Recovery Coalition to join our voices with other conservation groups speaking out to protect birds and their habitat.
- The COVID-19 pandemic launched Georgia Audubon into the virtual realm, and we have had tremendous success offering a variety of digital and virtual content to people from across Georgia and beyond. To date, we’ve had more than 3,000 people attend our webinars and virtual events!
- Even though we had to delay Georgia Bird Fest in the spring, we relaunched the event in September. In addition to our usual trips and bird walks, we’ve added some fabulous webinars that have allowed us to reach more people from across Georgia, the southeast, and beyond.
- And there’s more in the works!



*Despite the pandemic, Georgia Audubon has found creative ways to engage with our members across the state. This picture was taken at the Georgia Bird Fest event at Camp Meeting Rock Preserve. Photo by Dottie Head.*

Keep an eye out for more updates in *Wingbars*, via our e-newsletter, and in blog and social media posts. It’s an exciting time for Georgia’s birds, and we look forward to sharing the joy of birds with people from across the state. Like you, we are eagerly anticipating the resumption of more normal activities in 2021 and we are eager to be able to gather in person to catch up with our members, friends, and partners, and to celebrate our achievements. In the meantime, be safe and well.

## What Does Nature Have to Tell Us About Community?

*(Continued from Page 3)*

We have a lot of problems to solve, and a big world to think about. It is becoming increasingly clear that we need to seek out and apply the solutions that

nature has already crafted. My hope is that in this time of urgent problem solving, we would continue to ask, “What can nature tell us?”

# Chapter Update: Ogeechee Audubon Conducts Rusty Blackbird Surveys at Key Wintering Site

By Stan Gray, Ogeechee Audubon



The Rusty Blackbird (*Euphagus carolinus*) has been undergoing one of the most profound,

chronic, long-term and acute short-term declines of any North American bird species. This is the conclusion of the International Rusty Blackbird Working Group, a group of biologists, conservationists, and other professionals, formed in 2005 and dedicated to researching and reversing this decline. Estimates based on community science projects place the total population loss since the 1960s at 85 to 95 percent. Despite extensive recent studies, the causes of this decline are still somewhat speculative and point to no one factor. However, one of the key contributors appears to be the dramatic loss of wooded wetlands on southeastern wintering grounds.

The area just north and west of Savannah still contains numerous patches of intact wooded freshwater wetlands, although in many cases they are under increasing pressures from population growth. One such location is the 254-acre campus of the Savannah Christian Preparatory School (SCPS). Apart from the school buildings and athletic facilities, the campus is composed of and surrounded by an expansive wetlands complex.

In 2011, returning to SCPS for a mid-afternoon Great Backyard Bird Count after having been introduced to the location on the most recent Christmas Bird Count, Ogeechee Audubon Society (OAS) member Stan Gray encountered a sizable flock of Rusty Blackbirds, larger than from any other recent local reports. Several subsequent visits gave indication that this was indeed a special wintering spot for the blackbirds. He alerted other OAS birders about the phenomenon and visits and recorded observations grew over the next several years. A high count of 395 birds was recorded in December 2015. Birders visited at various times of the day, but one interesting pattern became apparent: the highest counts were being recorded in late afternoon, and that coincided with the birds emerging from the wetlands to congregate on the school grounds proper, in large lawn areas, or in and around an old grove of pecan trees.

Armed with a growing body of observational data, Gray uncovered a doctoral dissertation written in 2013 by University of Georgia graduate student Patricia Newell (see <http://rustyblackbird.org/wp-content/uploads/Newell2013RUBLDissertation.pdf>.) The dissertation focused on the winter ecology of the Rusty Blackbird. In it, Newell summarized that a suburban landscape composed of a patchwork mosaic of forested wetlands,

grassy expanses, and pecan groves seemed to provide the blackbirds with the best resources for wintering. She had independently noted many of the same behavioral observations that the birders of Ogeechee Audubon were seeing at SCPS. OAS birders were observing Rusty Blackbirds at other nearby wetlands, but never in numbers approaching the sizable flocks encountered regularly at SCPS. When observations were made in early to mid mornings (the typical period when birders take to the field), counts in single digits, often just one or two birds, were recorded. Even at SCPS, morning counts yielded low numbers. Other than a “sentinel” bird perched high above the wetland floor, the remainder of the flock foraged deep within the forested wetland, barely if at all detectable as they rummaged through leaf litter for aquatic invertebrates.

Access to these wetland foraging areas is often poor at best, the dark rusty blackish birds disguise quite well, and counts have probably been seriously underestimated.

In 2019, SCPS received funding to install a new main entrance gate, which would enhance the physical security of this private school. Although it has always been private, access to the campus had not been tightly controlled, especially on weekends. OAS members had come to be recognized by school officials, and birders frequented the campus. The new gate changed the issue of accessibility, and with it a fear that birders would no longer be able to monitor the status of the Rusties (and the multitude of other bird species inhabiting the diverse natural landscape of the campus).

A meeting ensued in the summer of 2019 between school officials and a committee from OAS led by President Leslie Weichsel. The importance of the campus as a vital wintering habitat for Rusty Blackbirds was explained, and a cooperative agreement was reached allowing OAS to field a dedicated team of birders having access (otherwise restricted) to the campus at regularly scheduled, pre-announced times. In addition to Rusty Blackbird surveys, the team was also granted permission to perform comprehensive surveys of the entire 250+ acre campus periodically throughout the year. The data

(Continued on Page 8)





## Rusty Blackbird Surveys

(Continued from Page 8)

resulting from all this survey work would be shared with SCPS officials (and posted on eBird) in support of future funding initiatives leading toward enhancement of the natural resources of the property.



To monitor the 2019 fall migration of Rusties and their impending approach, the first OAS team survey was conducted November 3. No blackbirds were sighted that day, but the next survey on November 10 yielded 28, the first recorded seasonal eBird sighting within the surrounding 200+ miles. From then through March 22, 2020, a total of 18 surveys were conducted (all on Sunday afternoons, when the campus is least active), essentially one per week. Consistent with previous years, the highest count occurred in mid-December: 138 birds. Numbers varied somewhat from week to week, but typically 60-90 birds frequented the grounds. Significant movement out of the area, presumably back toward the breeding grounds in northern Canada and Alaska, began the week of March 2, and the last four birds were spotted March 22; one week later none remained.

The OAS survey team consists of a core group of five birders, joined frequently by several other Society members. Many photos were taken throughout this first survey period for documentation and posting on eBird (several of which are included herein). Over the course of the period, skills in identification improved immensely for all through intense observations, especially when mixed foraging flocks of Rusties, Common Grackles, Brown-headed Cowbirds, and Red-winged Blackbirds would commingle. Team member and author Diana Churchill published a full-page article in the November 26, 2019 issue of the *Savannah Morning News*, informing the public of the OAS survey initiative at SCPS. Key school officials have become increasingly engaged and supportive of the effort, and much potential exists to use it in student environmental education programs or projects in the future. Surveys will recommence in early November, and although the schedule or frequency has not been finalized, OAS plans to take advantage of the extensive baseline data created this past winter to monitor changes in population dynamics annually. Short- and long-term survey results at this site will hopefully help inform the extensive research being conducted to reverse the decline of this intriguing, yet highly vulnerable blackbird species.

[Note: the survey team has recorded detailed observational data via eBird on each sighting of Rusty Blackbirds at SCPS. To view a discussion of these observed behavioral patterns, the reader is invited to explore the eBird Species Map for Rusty Blackbird, then enter Savannah Christian Preparatory School for location. By clicking on the point designator for "hotspot," all reports since 2011 can be accessed. Additionally, the aerial photography demonstrates the patchwork mosaic of wetlands and other supporting manmade features—i.e., grassy expanses and pecan groves—on site.]



# GEORGIA AUDUBON

Georgia Audubon extends a special thanks to Vortex Optics for sponsoring our November issue of *Wingbars*.

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# UPCOMING EVENTS

We will continue adding virtual events and field trips, even after *Wingbars* goes to press. Please check our website or our *Bird Buzz* e-newsletter for additional updates.

**Note on Field Trips and other in-person events:** Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, we are currently limiting field trips to 15 participants per trip and asking people to register and agree to abide by a set of safety precautions. Please visit our field trip page at [www.georgiaaudubon.org/field-trips](http://www.georgiaaudubon.org/field-trips) to register for upcoming trips.

## NOVEMBER

**Field Trip: Piedmont Park (Fulton County)**  
**Saturday, November 7 at 8:00 AM**

Leader: Jason Ward  
Registration required at  
[www.georgiaaudubon.org/field-trips](http://www.georgiaaudubon.org/field-trips)

**Webinar: Special Birds and Beer Presentation –  
Piedmont Park: A Place for People and Wildlife**  
**Sunday, November 8 at 3:30 PM**

Cost: FREE Register at [www.georgiaaudubon.org/digital-resources](http://www.georgiaaudubon.org/digital-resources).  
See event details on the last page of this newsletter.

**Field Trip: Reynolds Nature Preserve (Clayton County)**  
**Wednesday, November 11 at 8:00 AM**

Leader: Anne McCallum  
Registration required at  
[www.georgiaaudubon.org/field-trips](http://www.georgiaaudubon.org/field-trips)

**Georgia Audubon Birds Stories:  
Crow Not Crow, by Jane Yolen**  
**Friday, November 20 at 9:30 AM**

Cost: Free Register at [www.georgiaaudubon.org/georgia-audubon-bird-stories](http://www.georgiaaudubon.org/georgia-audubon-bird-stories).

## DECEMBER

**Field Trip: Piedmont Park (Fulton County)**  
**Saturday, December 5 at 8:00 AM**

Leader: Jason Ward  
Registration required at  
[www.georgiaaudubon.org/field-trips](http://www.georgiaaudubon.org/field-trips)

**Webinar: The Effects of Urban Noise and Light Pollution on Avian Species**  
**Tuesday, December 8, at 7:00 PM**

Cost: FREE Register for this free Zoom event at [www.georgiaaudubon.org/digital-resources](http://www.georgiaaudubon.org/digital-resources).  
With the increase of people moving into urban areas every day, anthropogenic (human-produced) sources of light are having a drastic effect on wildlife. Birds have been particularly useful to study when looking at these urbanization effects, specifically urban noise and light pollution. Join Lauren Pharr, Master of Science student at North Carolina State University, for a discussion of her findings and how urbanization continues to affect local bird species.

**Webinar: Georgia Audubon Annual Meeting and Holiday Party**  
**Sunday, December 13 at 3:30 PM**

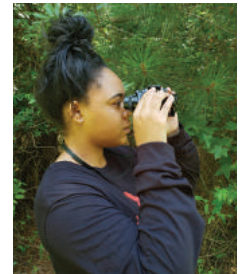
Cost: FREE Register for this free Zoom event or purchase raffle tickets at [www.georgiaaudubon.org/digital-resources](http://www.georgiaaudubon.org/digital-resources).  
Join Georgia Audubon for our virtual Annual Meeting and Holiday Party. We can't meet in person this year, but we still have some fun things planned. We'll hear an update about the new Georgia Audubon with short updates on our conservation, education, and community engagement efforts and vote on a slate of new board members. We'll have a variety of door prizes and be raffling off a pass for two guests for a day trip to Little St. Simons Island.

**Georgia Audubon Bird Stories: Owl Moon, by Jane Yolen**  
**Friday, December 18 at 9:30 AM**

Cost: FREE Register at [www.georgiaaudubon.org/georgia-audubon-bird-stories](http://www.georgiaaudubon.org/georgia-audubon-bird-stories).

**Field Trip: Reynolds Nature Preserve (Clayton County)**  
**Wednesday, December 9 at 8:00 AM**

Leader: Anne McCallum  
Registration required at  
[www.georgiaaudubon.org/field-trips](http://www.georgiaaudubon.org/field-trips)



*Lauren Pharr will present a webinar on the effects of urban noise and light on avian species on December 8.*

## JANUARY

**Field Trip: Piedmont Park (Fulton County)**  
**Saturday, January 2 at 8:00 AM**

Leader: Jason Ward  
Registration required at  
[www.georgiaaudubon.org/field-trips](http://www.georgiaaudubon.org/field-trips)

**Field Trip: Reynolds Nature Preserve (Clayton County)**  
**Wednesday, January 13 at 8:00 AM**

Leader: Anne McCallum  
Registration required at  
[www.georgiaaudubon.org/field-trips](http://www.georgiaaudubon.org/field-trips)

**Virtual Early Birds Book Club:** The Early Birds will meet next on Sunday, January 24 at 2:00 PM. We will discuss Gregory Nobles' biography, *John James Audubon: The Nature of the American Woodsman*.

# Travel with Georgia Audubon in 2021

Georgia Audubon was founded to foster the joy of birding and to protect bird-friendly habitat around metro Atlanta. In the decades since our founding, the organization has evolved into one of the state's leading conservation and education organizations. The Georgia Audubon Travel Program strengthens current goals to protect Georgia's birds by instilling a love of nature that will impact conservation, education, and community engagement on a local level. Space is limited, so please register early. Registration for our 2021 trips opens to Georgia Audubon members on November 2, 2020, at 10:00 AM. Registration will open to non-members on November 9, 2020, at 10:00 AM. For complete itineraries and registration information on each of these trips, please visit [www.georgiaaudubon.org/travel](http://www.georgiaaudubon.org/travel).

**Merritt Island and Central Florida**  
**Guide: Adam Betuel**  
**January 15-18, 2021**

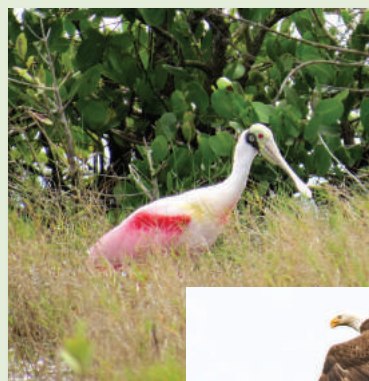
**St. Marks Wildlife Refuge and Wakulla Springs (Florida)**  
**Guides: Melanie Furr and Dottie Head**  
**February 5-8, 2021**

**Spring Migration on Dauphin Island (Alabama)**  
**Guides: Adam Betuel and Michelle Hamner**  
**April 8-11, 2021**

**Northern Utah and the Mountain West (Utah and Idaho)**  
**Guides: Adam Betuel, with local support from Mountain West Birding**  
**July 25-30, 2021 (optional extension July 30-August 1)**

**Winter in the Lower Rio Grande Valley (Texas)**  
**Guides: Dottie Head, with local support from East West Birding Tours**  
**November 15-20, 2021**

**Endemic Birds of Jamaica**  
**Guides: Adam Betuel, with local support from Dwayne Swaby**  
**December 4-10, 2021**



## Raffle: Two Night Stay in The Lodge at Little St. Simons Island

**Donated by Little St. Simons Island**

**Raffle Tickets: \$20/each or six for \$110**

Little St. Simons Island has graciously donated a two-night stay for two at The Lodge on Little St. Simons Island for our 2020 Virtual Holiday Party Raffle. Stays are all inclusive and include accommodations, boat transfers to and from the island, three prepared meals daily, soft drinks, all activities including naturalist-led excursions, and use of all recreational equipment. The winner will be selected at our Virtual Holiday Party and Annual Meeting on Sunday, December 13, at 3:30 PM. You do not need to be "present" at the virtual event to win. The trip must be used by December 15, 2021.

To learn more or purchase raffle tickets visit [www.georgiaaudubon.org/upcoming-events](http://www.georgiaaudubon.org/upcoming-events).

# Wingbars

## GEORGIA AUDUBON

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## Webinar: Special Birds and Beer Presentation – Piedmont Park: A Place for People and Wildlife

Sunday, November 8 • 3:30 PM

**Cost: FREE**

**Register at [www.georgiaaudubon.org/digital-resources](http://www.georgiaaudubon.org/digital-resources).**

Join Georgia Audubon Director of Conservation Adam Betuel for a special Birds and Beer webinar on Piedmont Park. Atlanta's biggest urban park, Piedmont Park covers more than 200 acres in the heart of Atlanta and provides habitat for many resident and migratory birds. Adam will virtually "sit down" with the following panel of experts to highlight some of the park's most birdy features and discuss the rewards and challenges of managing this urban oasis for people and wildlife.

### Panelists:

- **Louise Harris**, director of programs, Piedmont Park Conservancy
- **Gabe Andrie**, habitat conservation program coordinator, Georgia Audubon
- **Jason Ward**, host of the Birds of North America web series and Piedmont Park's most famous birder



*The Exhibit at Piedmont Park.  
Photo by Jessie Parks.*

## Webinar: Georgia Audubon Monthly Meeting Audubon's American History with Gregory Nobles

Sunday, January 24 • 3:30 PM

**Registration: Free to attend. Books available for purchase from Eagle Eye Book Store.**

Learn more at [www.georgiaaudubon.org/monthly-meetings](http://www.georgiaaudubon.org/monthly-meetings)