



Lower Neuse Bird Club

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April Cancellations

by Michael Cheves

The April LNBC meeting has been canceled, due to the lockdown mandate issued by Gov. Cooper. The planned field trip to the Bear Grass VOA site has been *postponed*. Please stay tuned for updates, as that trip will be rescheduled, if possible.

In the meantime, solo birding remains a viable option. Gov. Cooper has encouraged hiking and other outdoor recreation, with the stipulation of keeping a safe distance from other people. Some local birding hotspots may be inaccessible due to the lockdown, but the majority have remained open (such as Martin Marietta Park in New Bern). Should you choose to stay at home during this period, it is a great opportunity to work on your “yard list”. Our migratory warblers have begun to arrive from the tropics, so there are a lot of great potential bird sightings to be found over the next month!

March 2020 Meeting Minutes

by Jura Hill

Prior to the start of the meeting, we celebrated a special birthday for a long-time member and club president. Al Gamache has been a member of the club for 18 years, and we were happy to help him celebrate a milestone birthday! Al is our expert on putting bird calls into descriptive “sayings” that are easier to remember.

The March meeting of the Lower Neuse Bird Club was called to order at 7:00 PM, on Tuesday the 3rd by Wade Fuller, with 25 members in attendance.

During Show & Tell, it was noted that a kayaker saw a group of 24 **White Pelicans** at the New Bern Quarry. Carol Reigle had both a **Bronzed Cowbird** and a **Clay-colored Sparrow** in her yard. As word spread, she put out a guest book, and as of this meeting, 79 visitors had signed the book. Les mentioned that the Purple Martins had arrived early, and that he had already seen some Eastern Bluebird eggs. Since the LNBC began in 1992, club members have been credited with adding 6 bird species to the North Carolina state list.

We had a pre-show slide presentation of some of the pictures taken of the vast numbers of Tundra Swans and Snow Geese off Pat’s Road at Pocosin Lakes NWR on the February field trip. The main speaker for the night was Mike Creedon with **Madagascar – Part 2**.

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March 2020 Meeting Minutes

by Jura Hill, continued from Page 1

During their trip to the island nation of Madagascar, Mike and his wife Carol spent a lot of time traveling to different areas to find birds. The widespread deforestation there means the birds are spread out in the few remaining forested regions. Madagascar is known for its diversity, but not density, of birds. Many of the species do not migrate, so you must go to where they live for any chance of seeing them. There are just over 300 recorded species in Madagascar, and around 130 species are endemic. There is only one woodpecker species, two gull species, and one non-native sparrow species. The birds are generally quiet outside of mating season, and tourist season does not coincide. The main sounds that were heard on the trip were lemurs and frogs.

During the Creedon's 30-day trip, they saw 67 endemic species and 14 non-endemic. Mike has wonderful slides of many groups of birds such as sunbirds, stonechats, fodies, bee-eaters, and the list goes on. On more than one occasion, the guides that were taking them to find certain species would get down and crawl through the undergrowth off the trail to try and flush a bird to the path. It's worth noting that there are no venomous snakes on the island. One lodge they stayed in had a hand-painted sign of the name, Tia Asity Lodge. The owner named it after the **Schlegel's Asity**, which is a small forest bird with vibrant blue and green skin around its eyes. Other striking birds with blue eye patches are **Couas**, which are a member of the Cuckoo family.

Many birds are easy to compare to our familiar birds. The endemic **Long-tailed Ground Roller** is like our Roadrunner. The **Madagascar Newtoni** is our Kestrel. As with our herons and egrets, the Madagascar species have colorful names; **Purple Heron**, **Black Heron**, and **Dimorphic Egrets**. The Black Heron was at the top of the want-to-see list, and the Creedons finally got a good viewing on the last day of the trip. The Black Heron is fascinating for the way it makes a forward-facing umbrella with its wings when hunting and feeding. Other birds are not like anything we are used to, such as the iconic **Hoopoes**.

There are no vultures on the island, and the species filling that niche are the **Pied Crow** and the **Yellow-billed Kite**. The biggest avian pest on the island is the introduced **Common Myna**. Lemurs fill the niche of some birds, with the **Red-ruffed Lemur** being a prolific pollinator.

The other animal species we saw photos of and learned about included a giant swallow-tail butterfly with a one-foot wingspan, the bizarre giraffe weevil, Kung-fu crickets, and a three-eyed gecko (the third eye really works!). The larger species include the largest carnivore, the fossa, which is a cat/mongoose-like creature that weighs in at around 20 pounds. The most dangerous animal that regularly kills people on the island is the Nile crocodile.

It was wonderful to see and learn so much about the island, the animals, and the people. Thanks to the Creedons for sharing their experience!



Fort Macon Bird Walk: March 7, 2020

by Ronnie Hewlette

Saturday, March 7th, five members of the LNBC braved the cold winds of this windy first Saturday of March to journey over to Fort Macon SP at Atlantic Beach, NC. Temps were in the 40s and 50s, but the winds (20+ with 40 mph gusts) could almost blow you over. A couple of scopes found their way to the wind-swept beach-sands before the morning was over!

There were a few missed opportunities for the morning, but everything considered, we had an outstanding morning. We needed more eyes to catch all of it; birds that were up, were moving FAST! And anything in the water was bobbing fiercely, although the North winds held the surf fairly flat. We actually had to shorten our tripods and kneel on the beach to keep the scopes from shaking uncontrollably or risk having it blow over.

We started at the Visitor's Center, finding the expected birds at the feeders and then moved on over to the pond that is between the Visitor's Center and the Coast Guard Station. Normally this area is a good stop for a variety of species, but due to the winds, it seemed awfully quiet. There were quick flyovers of Cedar Waxwings, Am. Goldfinch, and a pair of Purple Martins. This is early for the Martins, but in the last couple of weeks, they have been reported more and more frequently. Moving on over to the Observation Deck that provides a look across the inlet, we encountered an Eastern Meadowlark, flying against the wind, out over the water. Where in the world did that bird come from?

We had hopes of seeing a Great Cormorant out on one of the channel markers, but only a Great Black-backed Gull was found, hunkered down on top of one of the towers. Later in the morning, we would get a glimpse of a Cormorant in flight that appeared to be darker and larger/chunkier than a Double-crested Cormorant, but were unable to see any white on the throat or hip patch indicating a conclusive ID – we needed more eyes to catch the details!

Our next stop was to be the rock jetty on the Fort Macon beach. Man, was it blowing! We were not optimistic about the conditions for seeing anything but we pressed on – you never know what might turn up. As we approached the rocks, we saw what looked like Sanderlings, uncharacteristically working the rocks, out at the water's edge. Upon closer inspection, there was a Ruddy Turnstone with them and a somewhat larger gull-like bird on top of a rock, facing the wind. We had to get a better look – so we all moved closer, as it continued to stay in that one spot. What we saw made us move yet closer for a better view. Wow, could it be that we were looking at a Black-headed Gull which is a RARE bird for this location? Clean white breast and neck, dark, somewhat heavy bill with some faint reddish/orange near the base, ear spot (similar to that of a Bonaparte's Gull), reddish legs. We continued to question what we saw, but felt confident in calling it a Black-headed Gull.

Flash-forward three days and after inspecting Jeannie's pictures and conferring with other "experts", we reluctantly changed our call from the rare Black-headed Gull to that of a Bonaparte's Gull. Bummer... but the right call after seeing the pictures.



Bonaparte's Gulls are sleek, small gulls that breed in the boreal forest and winter farther south on ocean coasts, lakes, and rivers. Adults have black heads and red legs in the summer; in winter they have a neat gray smudge near the ear. They fly with ternlike agility, flashing bright white primaries that form a distinctive white wedge in the upperwing. Bonaparte's Gulls capture flying insects and pluck tiny fish from the water with equal ease. They are unusual among gulls in their use of trees for nesting.

Text from
allaboutbirds.org

Photo
©Jeannie Kraus

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Fort Macon Bird Walk: March 7, 2020

by Ronnie Hewlette, continued from Page 3

Back to the parking lot, with wind full in our faces, we're ready to move on. Our next stop is at the Bathhouse over on the beach, in search of Vesper Sparrows and a possible look at a Dickcissel that has been reported at this location.

We were able to locate several sparrows on the north side of the parking lots, finding the Vesper Sparrow, several Savannah Sparrows and Song Sparrows. Not bad, considering the strong winds, but no Dickcissel to be found. Moving over to the beach, we encountered gulls (Ring-billed, Laughing, Bonaparte's, Herring and Great Black-backed) along with a Royal Tern, Common Loons and a couple of Red-throated Loons. Also spotted in the rough chop was an Alcids (species unknown) based on its size, shape and posture. This family of birds includes birds like Razorbill, Murres, Guillemots and Puffins. It was a long way down the beach. We hiked about 1/10th of a mile, but never got good looks needed to confirm the species. All we could do was rule out most of the things normally seen at the beach. It was disappointing that we couldn't make out enough features to make a definite call on this bird.

One final stop before we call it a day! Over on the West side of Morehead City is a pond at the end of Old Airport Road that often holds waterfowl. Can you believe it? The far side of the pond was filled with Redhead ducks. Well, OK, 35 ducks but really, Redheads! Along with a handful of Ring-necked Ducks, Am. Wigeons, Gadwalls and Canada Geese. A real bonus for the day! We ended the day with 50+ species, including a stop along the Neuse River at River Bluffs to check for Grebes and waterfowl, on our return to New Bern. Not bad for a blustery day in March!



The **Vesper Sparrow** inhabits grasslands and fields across much of the northern United States and Canada. This streaky brown sparrow has a thin white eyering and flashes white tail feathers in flight; two features unique to the Vesper Sparrow. Although its most characteristic feature is a small chestnut patch on the shoulder, it's often hidden from view. As its name suggests, it frequently sings in the twilight of vespers – a sweet series of musical slurs and trills.

Photo and text from allaboutbirds.org



Vesper Sparrow
Photo ©Ronnie Hewlette

Fort Macon Checklist: March 7th, 2020

Compiled by Ronnie Hewlette

01. Canada Goose	19. Great Black-backed Gull	37. Northern Mockingbird
02. Gadwall	20. Forster's Tern	38. European Starling
03. Am. Wigeon	21. Royal Tern	39. Cedar Waxwing
04. Mallard	22. Red-throated Loon	40. House Finch
05. Redhead	23. Common Loon	41. Am. Goldfinch
06. Ring-necked Duck	24. Northern Gannet	42. Chipping Sparrow
07. Lesser Scaup	25. Double-crested Cormorant	43. Vesper Sparrow
08. Red-breasted Merganser	26. Brown Pelican	44. Savannah Sparrow
09. Ruddy Duck	27. Great Blue Heron	45. Song Sparrow
10. Pied-billed Grebe	28. Turkey Vulture	46. Eastern Towhee
11. Mourning Dove	29. Osprey	47. Eastern Meadowlark
12. Ruddy Turnstone	30. Eastern Phoebe	48. Red-winged Blackbird
13. Sanderling	31. Blue Jay	49. Common Grackle
14. Alcid sp.	32. Carolina Chickadee	50. Boat-tailed Grackle
15. Bonaparte's Gull	33. Purple Martin	51. Yellow-rumped Warbler
16. Laughing Gull	34. Carolina Wren	52. Northern Cardinal
17. Ring-billed Gull	35. Brown Thrasher	53. American Robin
18. Herring Gull	36. Northern Mockingbird	

Identifying Brown Warblers

by Alvaro Jaramillo

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If you ask a birder on the street what they like about warblers, you don't get answers about sweet songs or fantastic behaviors. What you hear is an overwhelming response about diversity and color. Warblers are the birder's version of a box of chocolates. Each one is different, although they're about the same size, and some you like more than others, but, really, would you refuse any of the chocolates in the box? Unlikely! A perfect spring morning and a tree lit up with 10 or so warbler species, some yellow, others orange or even black and gray or green and black is what we imagine when we contemplate warblers.

Well, this column is not about those, it is about the duller warblers – to some, the “sparrows” of the warbler world – the ones that are largely olive or brown and tend to be more skulking and difficult to see at times. We're considering five species: the ovenbird, waterthrushes, and worm-eating and Swainson's warblers. Let's just loosely call them the “brown warblers”, although some are far from being brown. All of these brown warblers have uniform wings and upperparts and no wing bars or fancy stuff. Most of the differences are in their shape, head, or underpart patterns.

Ovenbird. The ovenbird is a warbler, and this has been confirmed with DNA techniques. When you travel to Latin America, you'll find a large family of birds sometimes known as the “ovenbirds”, named for the rufous hornero, a bird that builds a gorgeous mud “oven” as a nest. *Hornero* refers to an oven maker in Spanish. Our ovenbird does not belong to this family, but it did get its name for the same reason. Unique among warblers, it builds a difficult-to-find nest on the ground, made of sticks and grass, that is a dome like a Dutch oven, with a side entrance. I think that this is so obscure that most birders would vote to rename it the “teacher bird”, because that reflects something more obvious about the ovenbird. In spring it belts (and, yes, they are quite loud) a song that sounds like *teacher! teacher! teacher!* It actually sounds more like *teecha! teecha! teecha!* but “teacher” does the trick for remembering this repetitive and easy-to-recognize song of the eastern and northern forests. The ovenbird ranges to northeastern British Columbia in the West as a breeding species, staying east of the mountains.

Like the waterthrushes, it is streaked below. At one point, the ovenbird and the waterthrushes were thought to be closely related. But in 2011, a major work on the relationships of warblers determined that the ovenbird was actually the outlier, the oldest line of the warblers – the grandmother of all warblers! Waterthrushes are early lineages, as well, but not as early as the worm-eating warbler, which we will get to. In fact, all of the brown warblers are essentially early branches on the warbler family tree.

Waterthrushes. Waterthrushes are well named: They are streaked below like thrushes and are closely associated with water. There are two species: the **northern** and the **Louisiana waterthrushes**. The northern is a widespread breeder from Alaska to Newfoundland, south through much of British Columbia and the northern mountain states in the United States, but it migrates east of the mountains. As the name implies, the Louisiana is more of a southeastern species, reaching to the southern Great Lakes and southern New England, and just barely making it into southern Ontario.

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Ovenbird
Battlefield Park
New Bern, NC
12th April, 2018
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Identifying Brown Warblers

by Alvaro Jaramillo, continued from Page 6

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Throughout the breeding range of the Louisiana, the northern is present as a migrant. The type of water the waterthrushes like is different. In general, the northern prefers swamps, wooded pond edges, and generally still water. The Louisiana prefers moving water, often streams or creeks. There is overlap, but these generalities help. Waterthrushes are pale below with streaks, and have a pale supercilium. They have short tails and long legs and bob their rear end. They forage on the ground. Overall, the northern is more variable; some are distinctly yellowish-toned below, and others are clean white in their background color. The Louisiana shows a white background color below, but has a pinkish-buff wash to the rear flanks. A noticeably yellowish waterthrush is a northern, a whitish one could be either species. Northern is smaller, and smaller billed, than Louisiana. In the streaking pattern below, northern look more densely streaked and have streaked throats, whereas the Louisiana will show a clean white throat.

For me, the key to identifying the Louisiana is that it bobs differently, a higher and slower bob that is almost circular in nature, and the northern has a shallower and quicker, more nervous bob of the rear end. The high bob of the Louisiana is accentuated by its greater size and its long and brighter pink legs compared with the duller, dusky-toned legs of the northern. Some folks also look at the pale supercilium, which is longer and broader on the Louisiana.

As mentioned above, the ovenbird is also streaked below and was thought to be a relative of the waterthrush. But it has an entirely different look and feel. Ovenbirds like to walk on solid ground, not muddy shores, as do the waterthrushes. Ovenbirds bob their heads as they walk, not their rear end. This gives them a pigeon-like gait, or even quail-like look. They also pick up their feet as they walk, and they definitely walk – not a hop or a run, but a deliberate and confident walk. Below, the streaking is much crisper and looks more spotted than the messier streaking of a waterthrush. But the key is the head: They do not show a dark eyeline or supercilium, but instead a very large eye surrounded by a clean white eye ring. This gives the ovenbird a surprised or wide-eyed look. A good view will confirm a beautiful pumpkin-colored central crown stripe. When alert, ovenbirds cock their tail. Their small size and quite different gait should separate them from larger spotted thrushes like the Swainson's and hermit, which hop rather than walk.

Worm-eating Warbler. The remaining two are plain, but with a good view are rather attractive warblers. Some have called them the “spike bills”, because both the Swainson's and the worm-eating have strong, straight, sharply-pointed bills. Both are warblers of the Southeast, although the worm-eating is more widespread, ranging just shy of the Canadian border. It does show up commonly in Ontario as an overshoot migrant in May.

One of my favorite aspects of the **worm-eating warbler** is its foraging behavior. It prefers the mid-story and is particularly fond of foraging at dead leaf clumps and vines. My impression is always of a warbler looking under dead leaves for food. I have, in fact, many times seen a dark shape quite a distance away in the woods doing this and correctly identified a worm-eating, based on the foraging activity alone.

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Worm-eating Warbler
New Bern, NC (Taberna)
3rd August, 2019
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Identifying Brown Warblers

by Alvaro Jaramillo, continued from Page 7

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But then, when they come close, they are gorgeous in their simplicity. The part that strikes you is the buffy-pumpkin tone to the breast, almost a pale toffee color. The head is strongly striped, with a dark stripe through the eye and two lateral crown stripes around a pale buff central crown stripe. No other warbler in the United States or Canada is so strongly striped on the head. The worm-eating is a bird of mesic deciduous forested slopes, primarily in the East.

Swainson's Warbler. Swainson's Warbler is a species of the far Southeast. This is a bird of the undergrowth that forages on the ground and often sings from a hidden position near the ground. They can be tough to see. Of all brown warblers, this is the prize: hard to see even when in range and with the most restricted distribution. Their preference is for moist forest, and swampy, impenetrable thickets. Swainson's is a sturdy warbler, with a short and relatively wide tail. But the bill stands out for its long and spiky look, strong and sharply pointed. When foraging, these birds will sometimes move through the undergrowth, turning leaves to find food.

This warbler can look quite dull in the poor light of the undergrowth, but it can surprise you in good views: Its crown is a gorgeous rusty color – almost like that brownish-red you can see on a maple leaf in the fall, warm and beautiful. The other accent on the face is a dark eyeline that focuses your attention on that striking bill. Swainson's warblers are also somewhat flat crowned. If you're unfamiliar with the birds of the Southeast, and you worry that the separation between the worm-eating and Swainson's will be tough, it's not. Behavior alone helps, but that very striped head of the worm-eating is distinctive.

Distinguishing Songs. I mentioned previously the loud, repetitive song of the ovenbird, which is a relatively easy warbler song to learn. The next-easiest to learn is the flat buzz, almost insect-like, of the worm-eating warbler. Yet, it does resemble other buzzy trills, like that of the chipping sparrow, which tends to be in forest edge habitats, not inside the forest. The sparrow is a bit less insect-like and more variable than the song of the worm-eating. If the song is introduced by a few chips, then you can discard chipping sparrow, because this is something they never do but worm-eating often does.

Waterthrush songs are difficult to describe in words: They are loud songs coming from wet areas. The northern has almost a popping nature to its song that tends to be three-parted and quick: *chip chip chip Pwew Pwew chew chew chew!* It seems to accelerate, and the final section is lower-pitched than the middle. The Louisiana is more musical, and the initial notes are given more deliberately and slowly than those of a northern, whereas the second part is a more jumbled set of notes, more often two-parted as opposed to the three-parted sound of the northern. It may sound like *sweet sweet sweet tch tchewtchew-chew*, often falling off or trailing at the very end. The call notes of the waterthrushes are similar: a loud *tchip!* but the note of the northern is harder than that of the Louisiana.

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Swainson's Warbler
Catfish Lake, Jones Cty. side
"very shy bird"
17th July 2018
©Michael Cheves

Identifying Brown Warblers

by Alvaro Jaramillo, continued from Page 6

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Oddly enough, the starting notes of the Swainson's warbler song can sound similar to the start of the Louisiana's song. But it is less complex and not jumbled at the end. Some note it as saying *seew see SISter-ville*, but my ears hear it as *beer beer beer LOTS more beer*.

Warblers come in myriad forms, and we often focus on the colorful ones. However, these brown warblers are very cool in their own right. Odd gaits, leaf pecking, butt bobbing, quail-like, thrush-like, spike-billed – these descriptions say it all. What they lack in color, they make up for with colorful behavior. Good luck this spring finding some of these gems. Some are easier to come by than others, and if you live out West or in the North, you may have to head southeast to see a few of them, but it is well worth the trip. Have fun!

Alvaro Jaramillo is the author of several bird books and has fun guiding birding and nature tours. He lives with his family in Half Moon Bay, California.

Tongue Flicker

by Michael Cheves

In *The Peterson Guide to Woodpeckers*, author Stephen A. Shunk describes the Northern Flicker's tongue as being able to extend 2 inches or more beyond the tip of the bill, giving it the ability to probe deep beneath the ground's surface to forage for ants.

During the winter, less natural food means more feeder visits from these large woodpeckers. I took this photograph on 31st January, 2020. According to Shunk, the flicker's tongue is the most extensible of all the North American woodpeckers. Its tongue is coated in a mucus which can effectively "glue" the ants to its surface as the flicker forages for prey!

