

HIGH COUNTRY HOOTS

High Country Audubon Society

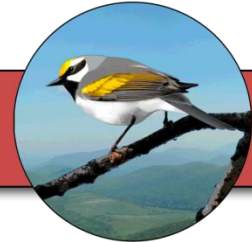


Serving Alleghany, Ashe, Avery, Watauga, and Wilkes Counties

Volume 13 – Issue 1

January 2021 to March 2021

President's Message



Hello fellow birders,

Yes, spring is finally beginning to arrive and I am really excited to see how our spring migration unfolds! Last year we had incredible migratory waterfowl, hopefully because of our enhanced wetlands in the area, but we'll see. Additionally, the vegetation in our native habitat improvement projects at Valle Crucis, Green Valley Park and Brookshire Park continues to mature, so eventually, we should see increased birds in those areas. One of our most exciting upcoming projects is partnering with Blue Ridge Conservancy to establish a native habitat demonstration and educational area at BRC's new home off of Aho Road. The site has multiple types of natural communities which can be enhanced in order to provide examples of how homeowners can improve their own bird habitat. We will also be working according to Audubon NC's guidelines to improve the diversity in our chapter, and this educational area will give us a chance to bring birding to more segments of the population.

Of course, the most popular activity for our chapter members continues to be our seasonal bird walk program, and the board will be finalizing that schedule in the next couple of weeks. We're hoping we can resume a fuller schedule encompassing the Greenway, Brookshire Park, Valle Crucis Community Park, New River State Park and Green Valley Community Park. Please check our website calendar often beginning in April to find out when and where these walks will occur. Our annual "Bird my Hotspot" program will proceed based on whether or not our hosts feel comfortable hosting.

Also, if you haven't done so, please sign up for our website forum so that you can receive all the notices about our activities or interesting bird sightings. To receive the email messages, you have to subscribe and indicate that you want to receive all topics.

Finally, quite a few new birders have moved into our area. If you meet any of them on our walks or while out birding on your own, please let them know about our website calendar and encourage them to join our chapter. We love having more birders!!!

Stay safe this spring, and we'll look forward to renewing our bird walk schedule.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Bill Stettin".

Remember to Report Your Bird Sightings on eBird

Launched in 2002 by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology at Cornell University and the National Audubon Society, eBird gathers basic data on bird abundance and distribution around the world. The goal of eBird is to maximize the utility and accessibility of the vast numbers of bird observations made each year by recreational and professional bird watchers. If you choose to participate in the eBird effort, your observations, including photos and sound recordings you upload yourself join those of others in an international network. All of this collected information is freely available through internet queries in a variety of formats. As of July 7, 2018, over 412,000 eBirders have entered almost 30 million checklists from around the globe.

eBird

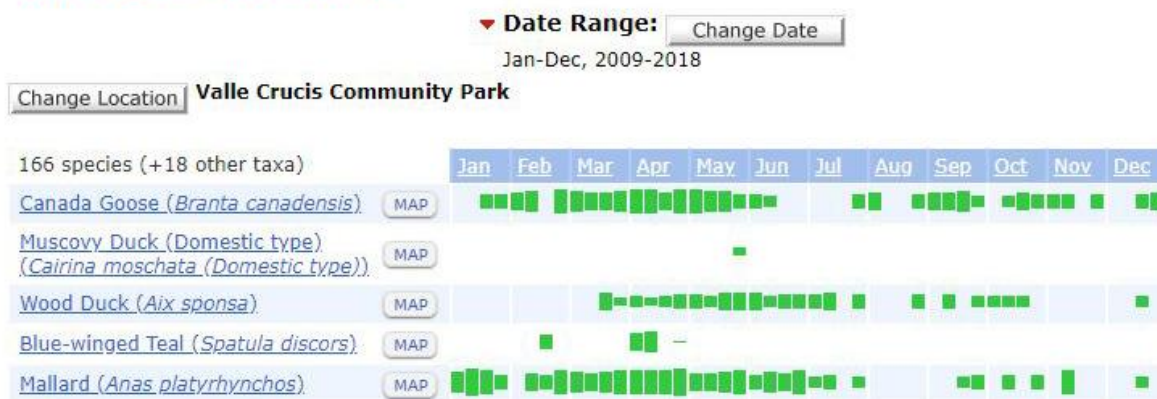


Observations entered into eBird range from a single species that was observed while mowing the lawn to extensive lists with photo and sound recordings made while birding all day. eBird encourages a broad range of observation types, and makes data entry easy. Some beginning birders are reluctant to enter their observations because they lack confidence, or are afraid to make an inaccurate entry. Fear not! Experienced birders monitor everyone's observations and are ready and willing to provide constructive feedback.

Also a great tool for planning your own birding outings, eBird can produce checklists of expected species for a local hotspot or an entire country. You can even create an illustrated checklist that includes photos from those who have birded the area before you. Here is what you will see if you explore Watauga County's records on eBird: <https://ebird.org/region/US-NC-189?yr=all>. To better understand how eBird works and create an eBird account, visit eBird's help page at <https://help.ebird.org/?t=>. Join your friends, join the fun, and be a citizen scientist!



Bird Observations



Example of a bar chart for Valle Crucis Community Park generated from eBird.

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Please check our HCAS web site regularly for the full HCAS activity calendar

<http://highcountryaudubon.org/calendar-2/>

For a full schedule of birding festivals and events throughout the U.S. please visit

<https://www.allaboutbirds.org/birding-festivals/>



New Members

Arthur & Joan Cone

Janet Montgomery

Donations

General Fund:

Martha Cutler
Arthur & Joan Cone
Janet Montgomery
Julia Ralston

Sue Wells Research Grant:

Julia Ralston

Young Birders Scholarship :

Julia Ralston
Richard Gray

Conservation/Education:

Julia Ralston
Jesse Pope

Other:

Terri Dale



HCAS member Guy McGrane summarizes sightings of unusual and rare birds, as well as observed trends for our more common and expected species in the High Country for each Hoots issue. Guy usually gleans these sightings from eBird, but please do forward your thoughts and comments, such as “I saw very few Belted Kingfishers in the High Country this winter as compared to last winter.” Sometimes what we are not seeing is as significant as what we are seeing! Frequently cited locations are abbreviated, with a key to abbreviations at the end of field notes.

((NOTES: 1. Use of the phrase “the region” refers to High Country Audubon's 5 county region of Alleghany, Ashe, Avery, Watauga, and Wilkes Counties. 2. Underlined bird species are especially rare. 3. To join the Watauga area Rare Bird Alert Text message system contact Guy McGrane.))

Notable sightings in five-county area for August, September, October and November, 2020

This fall birders in the High Country were treated to a really unusually high number of migrating warblers and thrushes, including astonishingly high numbers of Orange-crowned Warblers, Wilson's Warblers, and Nashville Warblers, and a huge push of Gray-cheeked Thrushes. We also enjoyed the first part of a winter finch irruption year, with massive numbers of Siskins, lots of Purple Finches, Red Crossbills all over the place, a few Evening Grosbeaks, and even a single Redpoll. Nice surprises this fall included a pair of Red-necked Phalaropes at Grandmother Lake, Glossy and White Ibis together at Roaring River, and first regional records of both Red-throated Loon and American White Pelican, both with documentary photos.

Waterfowl

Blue-winged Teal, not too surprising was a continuous and blanketing presence in the region this fall, starting with a nice count of 40 at SWEETGRASSLAKE on 28 AUG, and continuing rather late with a single at BROOKSHIRE on 11 NOV. A count of 75 at KERRSCOTT on 28 SEP was just a few less than the record for the region.

Northern Shoveler, singles were reported at BASSLAKE on 11 SEP and at RIVERSEDGE on 21 OCT.

Gadwall, nice finds were groups of 4 at LAKEKAHAWNA ON 31 OCT, and 3, which might have been the same flock, at GRANDMOTHERLAKE on 12 NOV.

Redhead, a single was reported with photo at LANDHARBOR on 12 NOV.

Ring-necked Duck, several reports this fall, which might be less than normal, were from BASSLAKE, LANDHARBOR, BROOKSHIRE, GRANDMOTHER, and a fairly high number of 35 at PRICELAKE on 31 OCT.

Lesser Scaup, our continuing phenom bird, which spent the fall here, is approaching 2 years of continuous residence at CHURCHHOLLOW. A few migrating flocks, which seemed like far below our usual fall totals, stopped in at GRANDMOTHERLAKE (6) on 30 OCT, LANDHARBOR (11) on 12 NOV, AND CAMPHARRISON (2) on 24 NOV.



Lesser Scaup, 18 August, Church Hollow Road Ponds, Watauga County. Photo by S. Dowlan

Greater Scaup, a single bird was seen and photographed at CAMPHARRISON on 24 NOV.



Greater Scaup, 24 November, Camp Harrison, Wilkes County. Photo by G. McGrane

Bufflehead, a couple flocks in Avery Co., were somewhat earlier than usual on 26 and 30 OCT, at GRANDMOTHERLAKE and WILDCATLAKE. A very large count of 54 was at WILDCATLAKE on 23 NOV.

Hooded Merganser, one reported at LAKEKAWAHNA on 29 AUG was fairly early.

Ruddy Duck, always a treat to find in the High Country, a flock of 6 stopped in at BASSLAKE on 31 OCT.

Fowl, Grebes, Doves

Ruffed Grouse, we had 4 reports this fall, one of 3 birds at BLUFFMOUNTAIN, a fairly expected high elevation, wooded location for the species. However, the other 3 reports were all from much lower elevation spots which have traditionally had fewer numbers, 2 along the New River--one near TODD and the other at BOONEGREENWAY-- and another even further down off the Blue Ridge in the foothills of Wilkes Co. Since populations in our region seem to be in steep decline, it is noteworthy that these reports all come from fairly mature ecosystems. This seems to be a trend in our area, and stands counter to conventional wisdom from the species' more northerly range where they are more common.

Pied-billed Grebe, these came through in average to good numbers this fall, with fairly early reports on 1 AUG at TROUTLAKE, and 17 AUG at LANDHARBOR.

Horned Grebe, only a single report came in from the whole region this fall, much fewer than usual, of a single bird at LANDHARBOR on 8 NOV.

Cuckoos, Nightjars, Hummers

Black-billed Cuckoo, we had 3 isolated and disparate reports this fall in the region of single birds at VALLECRUCIS on 12 AUG, at BEECHMOUNTAIN on 21 SEP, and at MAHOGANYROCK on 21 OCT, this last was somewhat late.



Common Nighthawk, 30 August, Grandview Overlook, Blue Ridge Parkway, Avery County. Photo by R. Gray

Common Nighthawk, some reports of large numbers this fall included about 100 at Mertie Road, Wilkes Co., on 2 SEP, about 200 at Rock cliff Rd., Watauga Co., on 6 SEP, about 300 at Laurel springs in Alleghany Co. on 10 SEP, and about 100 at TROUTLAKE on 11 SEP.



Common Nighthawk, 2 September, McCrae Meadow, Grandfather Mountain, Avery County. Photo by J. Sawyer

Eastern Whip-poor-will, slightly late were at least 3 birds that stayed until 14 SEP at DOCPRUITTHOMEPLACE.

Rufous Hummingbird, one initially reported as Rufous/Allen's on 28 OCT at ROARINGRIVER was later banded by Mark Armstrong of Knoxville TN, and confirmed as a female, hatch-year Rufous. It stayed through the period and into the winter. Another was banded, Identified and reported from the Twin Oaks community in Alleghany Co., on 6 NOV. The extent of its stay is unknown.

Waders, Shorebirds, Gulls

Rallus sp., an unidentified small rail was seen at the far end of GREENWAY a couple times, and was likely a different bird from the one(s) at the created wetland. It was reported on 14 and 25 SEP.

Sora, single birds were reported from the created wetland at GREENWAY starting on 9 OCT and continuing thru 7 NOV.

American Coot, 1 to 3 birds were at BASSLAKE starting on 1 OCT and continuing thru 26 NOV, setting a new late date for Watauga Co



Sora, 10 October, Created Wetland, Clawson-Burnley Park, Watauga County. Photo by A. Nelson



American Coot, 4 November, Bass Lake, Watauga County. Photo by S. Dowlan



Semipalmated Plover, 21 August, Lowes River's Edge Park, Wilkes County. Photo by G. McGrane

Semipalmated Plover, a single bird was at the puddles at RIVERSEDGE on 21 AUG, only the fifth record for the species in Wilkes Co.

Least Sandpiper, 2 reports came in from our region this fall, one at RIVERSEDGE on 21 AUG, and one at MTVERNONCHURCH on 12 SEP.

Short-billed Dowitcher, a first report for Wilkes Co. and only a third for our region was a bird seen and photographed at close range, by several observers, at ROARINGRIVER on 23 AUG.

Wilson's Snipe were only seen at 2 locations this fall in the region, GREENWAY and VALLECRUCIS from 12 OCT to 14 NOV.



Short-billed Dowitcher, 24 November, Roaring River, Wilkes County. Photo by G. McGrane



Wilson's Snipe, 23 October, Created Wetland, Clawson-Burnley Park, Watauga County. Photo by R. Gray



Red-necked Phalarope, Grandmother Lake, Avery County. Photo by J. Sawyer

Red-necked Phalarope, only a second record for our region was a pair of birds at GRANDMOTHERLAKE on 29-31 AUG. Interestingly, our other record, from 2009, was fairly close by at LANDHARBOR.

Spotted Sandpiper, of the about 10 reports in our region, one at ASU on 25 SEP tied for the late county date for Watauga.

Solitary Sandpiper, of the several reports in the region this fall, one at Elk Valley, Avery Co., on 6 OCT, stood as the latest fall report for the region.

Greater Yellowlegs, one photographed at ROARINGRIVER on 1 NOV was fairly unexpected, given there are only a handful of fall reports all time for our region.

Lesser Yellowlegs, fairly rare transients in the fall, one at RIVERSEDGEPARK on 3 SEP was only the third fall record for Wilkes Co., and one at GREENWAY on 18 SEP was only the second fall record for Watauga Co. These were only the fifth and sixth fall records for the region.



Bonaparte's Gull, 31 October, Price Lake, Watauga County. Photo by R. Gray

Bonaparte's Gull, one seen by several observers and photographed, at PRICELAKE on 31 OCT, was about the sixth all-time report for the species in Watauga, and only the second report for the High Country in the fall season.



Red-throated Loon, 24 November, Camp Harrison, Wilkes County. Photo by G. McGrane

Black Tern, not terribly uncommon in the early fall at KERRSCOTT, one was nevertheless a welcome sight weaving and dipping near the lake surface on 3 SEP.

Red-throated Loon, a first record for the region, a single bird was seen and photographed at CAMPHARRISON on 24 NOV.

Common Loon, a fairly sparse fall migrant with only a handful of reports for that season in our region, one was found injured near Blowing Rock, Watauga Co., on 15 NOV, and rehabilitated at the May Wildlife Center at Lees McCrae College, then released at WILDCAT, where it was seen for several days.

American White Pelican, a first all-time record for our region was one photographed at KERRSCOTT on 28 NOV. The bird was a high flyover, reportedly heading southeast.

Great Blue Heron (White Phase), the bird that had been staying near Valle Crucis over the summer, our first report of this subspecies that normally stays in the Florida Keys area, was last seen on 13 SEP, making its total stay over 3 months as it had been first seen around 8 JUN. This appears to be the longest stay for the subspecies in all of NC away from the immediate coast.

Great Egret, we had 5 or 6 reports of post-breeding wanderers throughout August and very early September, widely spaced at the major rivers and lakes throughout the area. One at GRANDMOTHERLAKE on 12 OCT was fairly late.

White Ibis, a group of 4 likely post-breeding wanderers, all juvenile/first year birds, turned up at a pig farm near Moravian Falls, Wilkes Co., on 5 AUG and stayed until 21 AUG. Another, possibly one of the same birds, was found at ROARINGRIVER on 23 AUG and through the 30th. These were only the second and third records for Wilkes County, and only about the eighth for our region as a whole.

Glossy Ibis, a very rare bird with only 2 previous reports in our region, both flyovers, we had our first stop-in bird with good photo documentation on 23 AUG at ROARINGRIVER. Another, a flyover, was reported from Half Moon Overlook on the BRP on 30 SEP.



Great Blue Heron (white morph), 25 August, Watauga River Bridge, Valle Crucis, Watauga County. Photo by S. Dowlan



Great Blue Heron (white morph), 13 September, Watauga River Road, Watauga County. Photo by M. Ramey



*Glossy Ibis, 24 August, Roaring River, Wilkes County.
Photo by G. McGrane*



*White Ibis, 5 August, Gebauer Farm, Wilkes County.
Photo by G. McGrane*

Raptors & Owls

Black Vulture, the mass roosting location for Black Vultures at Vilas Willowdale Church Road, Watauga Co., was active again this fall with up to 20 birds on 18 OCT.

Osprey, a bird that hung around VALLECRUCIS until 12 NOV set a record for late fall occurrence in the region.

Golden Eagle, 4 of these majestic birds were seen during hawk watching and another spotted from a parkway overlook. At GRANDFATHER hawkwatch two singles were noted on 20 SEP and one on 21 SEP, which is quite unusual given that only one had been seen there before in about 7 years of hawk watching. Another was seen from BEECHMOUNTAIN on 23 SEP, and another was noted from Flat Rock on the BRP in Avery Co., on 13 OCT.

Mississippi Kite, two were seen and photographed at ROARINGRIVER, which has

attracted kites before during the late summer and fall, on 23 AUG, while a likely migrant was noted above the BRP near Deep Gap, Watauga Co., on 2 SEP.

Northern Harrier, not terribly rare migrants to find at hawk watches, they nevertheless are tough to find in other situations, so a bird at VALLECRUCIS on 27 SEP, a pair at PONDMOUNTAIN on 14 NOV, and another single at ROARINGRIVER on 16 NOV were good finds. A fall season total of 5 at GRANDFATHER hawkwatch was about average.

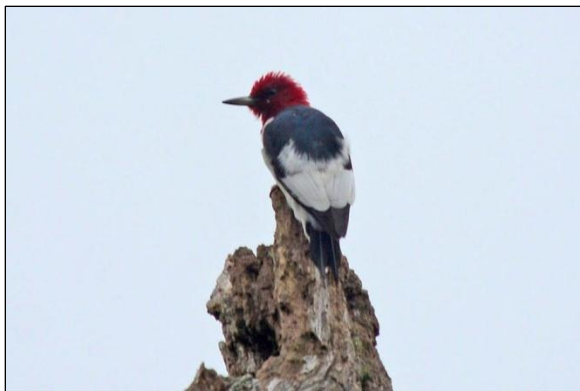
Bald Eagle, total numbers of migrating Bald Eagles were up this year, and 10 each day on 21 and 22 SEP at GRANDFATHER were good totals.

Rough-legged Hawk, a dark-phase bird was seen at PONDMOUNTAIN on 26 NOV and stayed thru the end of the period. This is looking more like a regular wintering location for the species.

Barn Owl, quite uncommon in our region, one was reported near Bina in Ashe Co., on 6 SEP. The location was near the north fork of the New River and appears to have several barns and good habitat, so more investigation could prove valuable.

Great Horned Owl, of the approximately 12 reports this fall, most were near major rivers and lakes, at sites including GREENWAY, TODD, TROUTLAKE, WATAUGARIVERROAD, and HIGHMEADOWS. A couple, however, were from higher elevation sites such as RICHMOUNTAIN and BEECHMOUNTAINBOG, with an astonishing total of 3 birds in one night. The area appears to support a large owl population as several more owls, Barred and Screech, were reported there on the same night.

Northern Saw-whet Owl, difficult to know whether this owl was a year round resident or migrating through the area, or even possibly wintering, one was heard at PRICELAKE on 21 NOV. Bird bander Mark Armstrong of Knoxville reports good evidence that many more Saw-whets than previously thought migrate through the larger area, but are mostly silent and undetected.



Red-headed Woodpecker, 12 October, Boone Greenway Trail, Watauga County. Photo by S. Dowlan



Red-headed Woodpecker, 12 October, Boone Greenway Trail, Watauga County. Photo by G. McGrane

Woodpeckers

Red-headed Woodpecker, thought to be mostly flyover migrants through our region, a couple different birds actually landed and were seen well, one at POWDERHORN on 4 OCT, and one, or possibly 2, at GREENWAY on 12 and 13 OCT. Flyovers were spotted at GRANDFATHER on 8 SEP and 2 OCT, MAHOGANYROCK on 20 SEP, and ASU on 26 SEP.

Falcons

Merlin, a likely nesting pair with juveniles was spotted engaging in bonding flight and feeding behavior at LANDHARBOR starting on 1 AUG and continuing through the month of August. This would be the first record of the species nesting in the state of North Carolina, and the southernmost breeding record in the eastern US. Perhaps because of their fast-growing populations overall, 11 birds seen at

GRANDFATHER hawk watch this year was the highest so far and in line with an increasing trend at that watch. Several others seen in the area were mostly at sites near lakes and major rivers. See High Country Hoots Volume 12, Issue 3 for a more detailed report with photos.

Songbirds

Olive-sided Flycatcher, it's been several years since anyone reported this species in Watauga Co., and one at VALLECAY on 29 AUG seems to be the only county record that is well-documented with photos and full description.

Eastern Wood-Pewee, on 5 NOV a heard-only bird was reported on eBird, on Ruthies Road in Watauga Co. The report appears to have been deleted, probably because of its very late date, a couple weeks past our previous late record. Any such late bird, if heard, should be tracked down and positively identified by sight, because several other birds can do good imitations of wood-pewees.

Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, we had three separate reports of this bird this fall, widely separated in location. The first was from LEES-MCCRAE on 13 SEP, another single bird was seen at ROARINGRIVER on 24 SEP, and another at ELKMOUNTAINOVERLOOK on 26 SEP. Given that there only a handful of previous reports from the region this was quite unusual.

Trail's Flycatcher, one either Willow or Alder Flycatcher stayed rather late at GREENWAY, last reported on 29 SEP. Though unexpected, there is a previous record for Watauga Co., of a bird a couple weeks later, which vocalized and was identified as a Willow Flycatcher.

Least Flycatcher, quite unusual to find at ANY TIME in the upper foothills, one was reported at MARLEYFORD on 5 OCT. A few late sightings in the mountains, where they are much more expected, at least in summer, were capped off by our latest regional record on 14 OCT at GREENWAY.

White-eyed Vireo, a bird seen at GREENWAY on 22 OCT set a late date for the High Country, but only by a few days.

Philadelphia Vireo, there were four reports of this always special bird this fall, all singles, starting at MAHOGANYROCK on 17 SEP, another at BEECHMOUNTAIN on 22 SEP, at GREENWAY on 27 SEP, and finally at WATAUGARIVERROAD on 4 OCT.

Warbling Vireo, another difficult vireo to find in our region, one at Ennice in Alleghany Co., on 4 AUG was fairly close to a known breeding spot and likely was a summering bird still in the area, while one at BROOKSHIRE on 6 SEP was very likely a migrant.

Fish Crow, there were several reports of a single crow making “uh-uh” calls in downtown Boone near the Boone Mall beginning on 6 AUG and lasting until 26 AUG. Any suspected Fish Crow in the high country should be documented thoroughly with recordings, pictures, and full description of the bird and its surroundings, and unfortunately none of the reports included much documentation. A count of 75 of these birds was likely a record high for the region at ROARINGRIVER, in the piedmont where they are much more common, on 24 AUG.

Purple Martin, unusual for the high country were a group of 12 migrating birds flying over THELUMP on 24 AUG.

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, fairly late but not a record for the county, was one bird seen by many at GREENWAY on 8 NOV.

House Wren, one reported on Puckett Road in Avery Co. on 29 NOV set a late date for that county. It remained through the winter, which was unusual for this high elevation site (3,400 ft.)

Sedge Wren, a great find was one seen by many and well photographed at VALLECRUCIS on 4 OCT.

Marsh Wren, one seen by many at ELKVALLEYPRESERVE on 6 OCT was a great find for Avery Co., only their third record, while one High Country Hoots

that stayed for several days at GREENWAY from 9-12 OCT was much more expected.

Gray Catbird, there were a few late fall sightings of this species, which appears to have been lingering later in the year in recent years. All were in the Boone area, and one on the GREENWAY stayed into the start of winter.



Sedge Wren, 4 October, Valle Crucis Park, Watauga County. Photo by R. Gray



Sedge Wren, 4 October, Valle Crucis Park, Watauga County. Photo by T. McNeil



Sedge Wren, 4 October, Valle Crucis Park, Watauga County. Photo by M. Ramey

Brown Thrasher, the latest reports this fall were both on 1 NOV, a single at NRSP-WAGONER and another single at GREENWAY.

Gray-cheeked Thrush, normally quite difficult to find even in their customary fall migration period, these birds came through the area in unusually large numbers this year, with at least 16 separate reports throughout the region, lasting from 23 SEP until 16 OCT, and most unusually several of the reports mentioned multiple birds, the largest with 4 birds at GREENWAY on 4 OCT.



Marsh Wren, 10 October, Created Wetland, Clawson-Burnley Park, Watauga County. Photo by S. Dowlan



Marsh Wren, 10 October, Created Wetland, Clawson-Burnley Park, Watauga County. Photo by A. Nelson

Hermit Thrush, difficult to find in the high country in winter, any birds that stay till the end of November are good finds, such as one at GREENWAY which was seen on 23 NOV and stayed into December, and another at Little glade Millpond on the BRP in Alleghany Co. on 25 NOV.

American Pipit, 3 birds seen at HIGHMEADOWS were only the sixth report of the species for Alleghany Co., while a count of 40 birds at VALLECRUCIS on 12 NOV (one was seen there a week later) tied a high number mark for

Watauga Co., and another fairly high count was 30 at RIVERSEDPARK on 22 NOV.



Gray-cheeked Thrush, 4 October, Watauga River Road, Watauga County. Photo by S. Dowlan

Evening Grosbeak, part of a massive continent-wide irruption this year of many different types of winter finch, we had about 5 separate sightings, 3 at feeders and 2 flyovers. 6 flew over at HIGHMEADOWS on 8 NOV, a single showed up at a feeder at ECHOVALLEY on 14 NOV, 8 were at a feeder near TODD on 15 NOV, one flyover was seen at SmokeTree Lodge, Watauga Co., on 15 NOV, and a single was seen and photographed by several birders at a feeder near Watauga High School on 16 and 17 NOV.

Purple Finch, 2 reported at Glade Valley on 26 SEPT on the BRP in Alleghany Co. appear to have set an early fall mark for the region. The one possible earlier fall record was a likely injured resident bird at Hanging Rock Ridge in Watauga Co. in early August 2019. Many more were reported fairly early in this major finch irruption year.

Common Redpoll, one well-documented bird at Flat Rock on the BRP, Avery Co., on 20 NOV, was an exciting find, and is hoped to presage future encounters this winter. There are only a handful of previous reports for the region, most quite long ago.

Red Crossbill, they were crazy-common this fall, with over 30 reports from the region. Probably the easiest flocks to find were at GREENWAY and BASSLAKE. Most of the birds apparently left our region after the first week in November.



Evening Grosbeak, 16 November, Geiger residence, Watauga County. Photo by S. Dowlan



Evening Grosbeak, 15 November, Cutler residence, Ashe County. Photo by M. Cutler



Evening Grosbeak, 16 November, Geiger residence, Watauga County. Photo by A. Nelson



Evening Grosbeak, 16 November, Geiger residence, Watauga County. Photo by M. Ramey



Le Conte's Sparrow, 7 November, Valle Crucis Park, Watauga County. Photo by S. Dowlan



Le Conte's Sparrow, 7 November, Valle Crucis Park, Watauga County. Photo by R. Gray



Le Conte's Sparrow, 7 November, Valle Crucis Park, Watauga County. Photo by A. Nelson



Le Conte's Sparrow, 7 November, Valle Crucis Park, Watauga County. Photo by M. Ramey

Pine Siskin, in this irruption year large flocks started showing up in the region by the first week in October, and were quite common through most of the fall. Largest numbers were 200 at Cecil Miller Road, Watauga Co., on 8 NOV, and 100 at VALLECAY on 15 OCT.

Grasshopper Sparrow, a report with a lengthy, detailed description, but unfortunately no photo, and which was accepted by the ebird reviewer, was by far the latest fall report for our region on 12 NOV at LEESMCRAE. There are only a handful of reports this late in all of western NC.

White-crowned Sparrow, always nice to see especially when in adult plumage, a large group of 9 birds with one adult was a real treat at BROOKSHIRE on 17 OCT.

Vesper Sparrow, unexpected were up to 4 birds reported at Woodland Drive, Watauga Co., from 9-20 SEP, while a report from POND MOUNTAIN on 26 SEP was less surprising. Singles also were reported at GREENWAY on 17 OCT and VALLECRUCIS on 8 NOV.

LeConte's Sparrow, only the third ever report for our region, and first for Watauga Co., was a well documented bird with plenty of photos, seen by many people on 7 NOV at VALLECRUCIS.

Lincoln's Sparrow, again showing that our area is a great attractor for migrating Lincoln's Sparrows, about a dozen separate records occurred this fall, from 19 SEP thru 26 OCT. A nice count of 5 birds was made at BROOKSHIRE on 17 OCT.

Bobolink, not terribly common in fall migration, 4 birds at BROOKSHIRE on 6 SEP were a nice find. One found at KERRSCOTT on 12 SEP was a good find for that piedmont site, in Wilkes Co. where there are only a handful of previous all-time records.

Baltimore Oriole, never an easy find in the upper foothills, even in migration, 2 well-seen birds at DOCPRUITTHOMEPLACE on 13 SEP were a real treat.



Red Crossbill, 15 October, Boone Greenway Trail, Watauga County. Photo by G. McGrane



Vesper Sparrow, 8 November, Valle Crucis Park, Watauga County. Photo by S. Dowlan



Lincoln's Sparrow, 17 October, Meat Camp, Watauga County. Photo by R. Gray

Rusty Blackbird, not common in our area, reports came in of 3 birds at CHURCHHOLLOWPOND on 12 NOV, up to 18 birds at VALLECRUCIS from 14-21 NOV, and a single bird at a feeder near Watauga High School on 21 NOV.

Northern Waterthrush, Much more common fall migrants above the Blue Ridge, 2 separate birds seen in Wilkes Co., were the first fall-season records for that county. They were at

MARLEYFORD on 3 SEP and RIVERSEEDGE PARK on 19 SEP.

Blue-winged Warbler, another warbler much more commonly seen in migration in the mountains, one seen well in the piedmont at MEMORIAL PARK was only the third record for Wilkes Co, below the Blue Ridge. One was also seen and photographed at VALLECRUCIS on 15 SEP.



Blue-winged Warbler, 15 September, Valle Crucis Park, Watauga County. Photo by A. Nelson

Prothonotary Warbler, a well-described bird at Rocky River Dr. in Ashe Co., was the first county report for that species, on 22 AUG. This was only the second fall-season record for the region.

Tennessee Warbler, a fairly common fall migrant in the region, one seen at VALLECRUCIS on 9 NOV was nevertheless quite late, breaking our previous late fall mark, from 2018, by a week.

Orange-crowned Warbler, with about 15 reports during the fall season, this was a banner year compared to most years when we see just a very few. Other than a single report from Avery Co., all were strangely from Watauga Co.

Nashville Warbler, another astonishing showing for fall migration was made by this species with also about 15 reports for the region. Again, most were in Watauga Co., possibly because of stronger birding effort, but singles were also seen in Ashe Co., Alleghany Co. , and Avery Co.

Hooded Warbler, one that was seen at ECHOVALLEY on 6 NOV was quite late, about a month later than all previous regional records except one from GREENWAY on 10 NOV 2019.

Kirtland's Warbler, a bird photographed and well described at ROUGHRIDGE was only the third record for our region, and a first county record for Avery, but was, amazingly enough, the second record this year in our region.

Cape May Warbler, several seen in late August were fairly early, all in the areas around VALLECRUCIS and GRANDFATHER.

Yellow Warbler, a bird seen and photographed at GREENWAY on 12 OCT set a mark for latest fall record in the region by a few days. It may have been the same bird seen there about a week prior.



Yellow Warbler, 12 October, Created Wetland, Clawson-Burnley Park, Watauga County. Photo by S. Dowlan

Yellow-throated Warbler, a bird that wintered near Pores Knob in Wilkes Co., in 2019, again returned, first seen on 3 NOV and continuing thru the period.

Canada Warbler, difficult to find at sites below the Blue Ridge, one was a nice surprise at DOCPRUITTHOMEPLACE on 13 SEP.

Wilson's Warbler, another fairly stunning set of records were 8 different reports of this warbler which is usually very difficult to find, starting on 6 SEP and going thru 22 OCT, at GREENWAY, BROOKSHIRE, WATAUGARIVERROAD,



Dickcissel, 9 October, Created Wetland, Clawson-Burnley Park, Watauga County. Photo by S. Dowlan

LEESMCRAE and PRICELAKE. A single record in the region per year is about average.

Summer Tanager, none of the 3 reports made this fall had either descriptions or photos, which was fairly disappointing given the rarity of the species in the high country, and the high rate of confusion with the very similar, especially in fall, and vastly more common, Scarlet Tanager.

Rose-breasted Grosbeak, one seen at ECHOVALLEY on 1 NOV appears to be a late mark for the region by about a week.

Blue Grosbeak, a couple reports from the Blowing Rock area on 26 AUG and 15 SEP lacked any description or acknowledgment that the bird is rarely seen in the region and also easily mistaken for the very similar Indigo Bunting, so their merit is unknown.

Indigo Bunting, one on 25 OCT at Old John's River Road, Watauga Co., was quite late.

Dickcissel, with only a handful of previous records in the region, 2 separate birds seen this fall, one of which was photographed, were a nice surprise. One seen by multiple observers was photographed at GREENWAY ON 9 OCT, while a second bird at VALLECRUCIS on 14 OCT, was only briefly seen and not photographed.

Location Key: **ASU**=Appalachian State University, Watauga; **BASSLAKE** =Bass Lake, Watauga; **BEECHMOUNTAIN**= Beech Mountain along the Watauga/Avery Line; **BEECHMOUNTAINBOG**= Beech Mountain bog near Chappell Farms Road, Watauga; **BLUFFMOUNTAIN**= Bluff Mountain Preserve, Ashe; **BROOKSHIRE** =Brookshire Park, Watauga; **BRP**=Blue Ridge Parkway, all counties; **CAMPHARRISON**= YMCA Camp Harrison, Wilkes; **CHAPPELL**=Chappell Farms Road area near Banner Elk, Watauga; **DOCPRUITTHOMEPLACE**=Doc Pruitt Homeplace on Browntown Road, Wilkes; **ECHOVALLEY**=Echo Valley Farm, Watauga; **ELKKNOB**=Elk Knob State Park and Elk Knob game lands, Watauga; **ELKMTNOVERLOOK**=Elk Mountain Overlook on the Blue Ridge Parkway near Deep Gap, border Watauga/Ashe; **ELKVALLEYPRESERVE**= Elk Valley Preserve near Lees McRae College, Avery; **GRANDFATHER**=Grandfather Mountain Area, Avery/Watauga **GRANDMOTHER**= Grandmother Lake in private development near Linville, Avery; **GREENWAY**=Boone Greenway, Watauga; **HIGHMEADOWS**= High Meadows Country Club, Alleghany; **KERRSCOTT** =Kerr Scott Reservoir, Wilkes; **LAKEKAWAHNA**= Lake Kawahna in downtown Linville, Avery; **LANDHARBOR**=Land Harbor Lake and community, Avery; **LEESMCRAE**=Lees McRae College, Avery; **LINVILLECREEK**=Linville Creek Overlook near Vilas, Watauga; **MAHOGANYROCK**= Mahogany Rock Overlook on the Blue Ridge Parkway, Alleghany; **MEMORIALPARK**= Memorial Park on the Yadkin river Greenway, Wilkes; **MTVERNON**=Mt. Vernon Baptist Church in Bamboo area, Watauga; **NRSP-WAGONER**= Wagoner Access to New River State Park, Ashe; **PONDMTN**=Pond Mountain Game Lands, Ashe; **POWDERHORN**=Powderhorn Community, Watauga; **PRICELAKE**=Price Lake in Julian Price Park, Watauga; **RIVERSEDGE**=Lowe's Park at Riversedge, Wilkes; **ROARINGRIVER**=Roaring River community, Wilkes; **ROUGH RIDGE**=Rough Ridge Overlook on the Blue Ridge Parkway, Avery; **SWEETGRASSLAKE**=private community lake near Blowing Rock, Watauga; **THELUMP**=The Lump Overlook on the Blue Ridge Parkway, Ashe/Wilkes line; **TODD**=Todd community, Watauga/Ashe border; **TROUTLAKE** =Trout Lake in Moses Cone Park, Watauga; **VALLECAY**=Valle Cay community, Watauga; **VALLECRUCIS**=Valle Crucis Community Park, Watauga; **WATAUGARIVERROAD** = Watauga River Road along the lower Watauga River, Watauga; **WILDCATLAKE**= Wildcat Lake near Lees McRae College, Avery

Notable sightings in five-county area for December 2020 and January and February, 2021

The Finch irruption continued from late fall, and flocks of Evening Grosbeaks with up to 36 birds were seen in the area. A few unusual waterfowl species were noted, with first or second county records of Ross's Goose, Snow Goose, and Canvasback, all in Avery. And Gulls were moving quite early in the High Country, with several flocks of Ring-bills in late January and mid February, and a much rarer Herring Gull stopping in.

Waterfowl & Fowl

Snow Goose, a group of 3 seen flying over at Banner Elk, Avery, on 2 FEB, were only the second ever report for that county.

Ross's Goose, a likely first record for Avery was a single bird at LANDHARBOR on 16 DEC. Undoubtedly the same bird was seen a couple days later at MILLPOND.

Greater White-fronted Goose, a group of 16 was seen and photographed on 15 FEB in the Ronda community of Wilkes.

American Black Duck, appearing to increasingly winter in our area, several different reports came in, including 3 at ROARINGGAP on 20 DEC, 2 at MILLPOND from 19 JAN to 6 FEB, 9 at Mountain View Rd. pond in Alleghany on 23JAN, and 1 at BASSLAKE on 12 FEB.

Green-winged Teal, a good find in the high country at any season, and especially so in winter, one near the BRP by Bamboo road in Watauga, in some beaver ponds on 10 FEB, was a nice surprise, a male in stunning plumage which was also seen at BASSLAKE on 14 FEB.



Canvasback, 19 Dec, Banner Elk Mill Pond, Avery County. Photo by M. Ramey

Canvasback, only the second record for the high country, and the first ever for Avery, was one seen well and photographed at close range at MILLPOND from 14-19 JAN.

Redhead, a female at BASSLAKE on 28 FEB was slightly early.

Ring-necked Duck, Mid-winter reports for this species in the high country are exceedingly rare--no January reports known before this year-- so one that spent most of the winter at GREENWAY on the New River, starting 10 JAN and continuing through mid February, was quite unexpected. Its possible that this bird was the same one that was released from rehab at Lees McCrae College and seen at Wildcat Lake in Avery from 2-4 JAN. Another single was at BASSLAKE on 3JAN. Also, 8 at PRICELAKE on 26 JAN were very early. There was a good count of 41 at PRICELAKE on 25 FEB.

Lesser Scaup, a group of 14 at PRICELAKE on 25 FEB was quite early.

Bufflehead, not uncommon on area lakes in winter, a group of 6 on the Watauga River at WATAUGARIVERROAD were a nice find on 30 JAN.

Common Merganser, a group of 4 probably spent the winter at an undisclosed location in Wilkes.

Ruddy Duck, not common at any season in the high country, and even less so in the winter months, a single bird at BASSLAKE from 23 FEB and continuing to the end of the period, was a nice find.

Ruffed Grouse, increasingly elusive at any time in the region, one was reported crossing the road near NRSP-WAGONERACCESS on 18 DEC.

Wild Turkey, a flock of 40 seen near Deep Gap in Watauga, on 23 FEB was a good number.

Pied-billed Grebe, not infrequently found on area lakes in wintertime, a couple this year overwintered on rather small rivers, one on the New at GREENWAY, and another on the Watauga near WATAUGARIVERROAD. This appears to be somewhat unusual.

Hummingbirds

Rufous Hummingbird, 2 spent the winter in Wilkes this year, one near Millers Creek and the other near Roaring River. Both were banded by Mark Armstrong and both appeared to be first year females.



Rufous Hummingbird, 2 Dec, Country Ridge Nursery, Wilkes County. Photo by G. McGrane



Rufous Hummingbird, 6 Dec, Country Ridge Nursery, Wilkes County. Photo by M. Ramey



Rufous Hummingbird, 4 February, Henry residence, Wilkes County. Photo by G. McGrane

Shorebirds & Gulls

Killdeer, Very large numbers of Killdeer were in the area this winter, especially in Wilkes where a flock of 300 on 3 JAN at MULBERRYFIELDS set a high count for our region, and 161 at RIVERSEDEGEPARK on 27 FEB was also quite a few. 45 at BROOKSHIRE on 24 FEB was also fairly high.



Wilson's Snipe, 27 February, Brookshire Park, Boone, Watauga County. Photo by P. Geiger

Wilson's Snipe, Tough to find in the High Country in winter, several spots produced good records this year, including BROOKSHIRE, GREENWAY, VALLECRUCIS, Lowes Home Improvement pond at Banner Elk, Avery, and the wetland by the corner of 105 and 194 near Banner Elk, Avery.

Bonaparte's Gull, a flock of 12 reported at Boone Fork Lake, Watauga, on 1 DEC was one of only a handful of all-time records for the High Country, and only the second wintertime report, the other being in Alleghany Co. in 1999. This appears to be a high count for the High Country.



Ring-billed Gull, 15 February, baseball fields at Hunting Hills Lane, Boone, Watauga County. Photo by S. Dowlan

Ring-billed Gull, a flock of 5 at Price Lake on 28 JAN was only the third ever report of gulls of any species in the High Country for the month of January. A wave of gulls appeared in the region on 15 FEB, with 3 different groups of Ring-bills in the Boone area, 5 near GREENWAY, 3 at BROOKSHIRE, and 1 at the Walmart parking lot.



Herring Gull, 15 February, New Market Center, Boone, Watauga County. Photo by A. Nelson



Herring Gull, 15 February, New Market Center, Boone, Watauga County. Photo by M. Ramey



Herring Gull, 15 February, New Market Center, Boone, Watauga County. Photo by G. McGrane

Herring Gull, a single bird at the parking lot of New Market Square, Watauga, on 15FEB, seen and photographed by many, was one of only a handful of all-time records for the High Country.

Raptors, Owls, Woodpeckers

Rough-legged Hawk, one continued from late fall through at least 23 DEC at POND MOUNTAIN, a known wintering location for the species.



Rough-legged Hawk, 6 December, Pond Mountain Game Lands, Ashe County. Photo by S. Dowlan

Great Horned Owl, a few reports in the area this winter came in from KERRSCOTT RESERVOIR, VALLECRUCIS, Todd in Watauga, West Jefferson in Ashe, and Sugar Grove in Watauga.

Northern Saw-whet Owl, a single report came from the BRP near Blowing Rock on 25 FEB.

Red-headed Woodpecker, never common anywhere at any season in our area, one was a nice find near ROARING RIVER on 12 FEB.

Merlin, the species has appeared to establish a long-term wintering location at KERRSCOTTRESERVOIR, with one seen and photographed by many during the Wilkesboro CBC on 5 JAN.



Merlin, 5 January, Kerr Scott Reservoir, Wilkes County. Photo by G. McGrane

Songbirds

Common Raven, 2 groups of 9 and 18 in northern Watauga on 12 DECEMBER were unusually large, one at ELKKNOB and the other near the Tater Hill area. A nest below the BRP bridge over Goshen Creek was good to find, starting on 10 FEB.

House Wren, the species appears to be increasing in winter in the area, but also seems to be a bit vagabond, rarely refound in the same place. This winter, singles were found at LINVILLECREEK on 31 DEC, at VALLECRUCIS on 29 DEC, and at KERRSCOTTRESERVOIR on 5 JAN. Most unusual was a bird at the high elevation of 3400 feet, at ELKVALLEYPRESERVE, seen several times from 2 through 12 JAN.

Gray Catbird, one lingered slightly late at GREENWAY until 3 DEC.

Brown Thrasher, as usual several were seen at the lower elevations in Wilkes this winter, and in the High Country, only 2 reports came in, both from Alleghany, one on 9 JAN near Glade Valley, and another appeared to return quite early on 14 FEB near Sparta.

Hermit Thrush, A rather sparsely seen wintering bird in the High Country, they appear to mostly reside on sunny hillsides along the major rivers.

This winter, one was found at GREENWAY most of the winter, one at BROOKSHIRE early and late, and one was at ELKSHOALS during the Mt. Jefferson CBC on 14 DEC. Birds were also seen in residential areas near Boone on 16 and 19 DEC. Known skulkers appear to winter singly in the High Country, which may partially explain their lack of calling, and the extreme difficulty in finding them.

American Pipit, a flock of 8 seen and photographed at VALLECRUCIS on 28 DEC was a great find.



Evening Grosbeaks, 24 January, Deep Gap, Watauga County. Photos by P. Geiger



Evening Grosbeaks, 24 January, Geiger residence, Boone, Watauga County. Photos by P. Geiger

Evening Grosbeak, this winter-irruptive species came south in good numbers to NC for the first time in a couple decades, and we had a few flocks in our area. Our biggest flock, up to 36 birds (!), came to a set of feeders off of Wildcat Rd, Watauga, starting on about the first of the year and staying through most of the period. Another large flock came to New River Hills Road, Watauga, with up to 12 birds in the latter half of January. 3 birds were seen at RIVERSEDGE on 4 JAN, and a single came to ROARINGRIVER on 1 DEC.

Dark-eyed Junco, we had a couple unusual western varieties show up this winter, one on 1 DEC at VALLECAY, and another on 1 FEB at Banner Elk in Avery.

Savannah Sparrow, a midwinter report of one at BROOKSHIRE on 1 FEB was fairly unusual.

Lincoln's Sparrow, one on the Stone Mountain CBC near Hays, Wilkes, was a great find, and appears to be the first record for our region in the winter season.

Yellow-headed Blackbird, only the second report for our region in any season, was one at RIVERSEDGE on 3 JAN.

Eastern Meadowlark, fairly uncommonly wintering in the High Country, 2 in separate places on the Mt. Jefferson CBC were good finds, and three seen at GREENWAY on 25 FEB, were apparently early returns.

Rusty Blackbird, 115 during the Wilkesboro CBC, in two large flocks at MULBERRYFIELDS and Mourn Rouge Rd, Wilkes, was a very high count for the region. These birds appeared to hang around for at least a couple weeks. A flock of 17 at GREENWAY on 13 FEB was notable for both its large size and early date in the High Country.

Yellow-rumped Warbler, 6 at GREENWAY on 28 FEB was an unusually high number for winter.

Yellow-throated Warbler, one near Pores Knob, Wilkes, continued from the fall through the season and marks the second year in a row this rarely wintering warbler has stayed.

Location Key: **BASSLAKE** =Bass Lake, Watauga; **BROOKSHIRE** =Brookshire Park, Watauga; **BRP**=Blue Ridge Parkway, all counties; **ELKVALLEYPRESERVE** =Elk Valley Preserve near Banner Elk, Avery; **ELKKNOB**=Elk Knob State Park and Elk Knob Game Lands, Watauga; **GREENWAY**=Boone Greenway, Watauga; **KERRSCOTT** =Kerr Scott Reservoir, Wilkes; **LEESMCRAE**=Lees McRae College, Avery; **LANDHARBOR** =Linville Land Harbor residential development and lake, Avery; **LINVILLECREEK**=Linville Creek Overlook near Vilas, Watauga; **MILLPOND** =the Mill Pond near Banner Elk, Avery; **MULBERRYFIELDS**=Yadkin River Greenway at Mulberry Fields, Wilkes; **NRSP-ALLEGHANYACCESS**=New River State Park-Alleghany Access area, Alleghany; **NRSP-WAGONERACCESS** =New River State Park at Wagoner Access, Ashe; **PONDMOUNTAIN**=Pond Mountain Game Lands, Ashe; **PRICELAKE**=Price Lake in Julian Price Park, Watauga; **RIVERSEDGE**=Lowe's Park at Riversedge, Wilkes; **ROARINGGAP** =Roaring Gap area with several lakes, Alleghany; **ROARINGRIVER**=Roaring River community, Wilkes; **TODD**=Todd community, Watauga/Ashe border; **VALLECAY**=Valle Cay community, Watauga; **VALLECRUCIS**=Valle Crucis Community Park, Watauga; **WATAUGARIVERROAD**=Watauga River Road area near Sugar Grove, Watauga

High Country Hoots Submission Guidelines

For the next issue (February-March-April), please have all material to the editor by May 15, 2021. Send all material to OWLHOOTER@aol.com

I will accept written material and photos in any format. Material in the body of an email is fine too. It will make my task easier if I receive material contained in a MS Word document in **Calibri 11 point - single space - with spaces between paragraphs rather than indents**. Use this issue as an example.

Suitable and desirable topics for articles include (but are not limited to): HCAS field trip accounts and summaries; an especially satisfying or successful day in the field, especially at a local (High Country) area; site guides for a High Country area not previously birded or described (only if free public access is available); short notes (one page or less) that describe unusual bird sightings, infrequently-seen behavior, and nest locations and descriptions for less common bird species.

Photos are best received as jpegs... A minimum of 72 dpi helps a lot, and more is better. I can crop and edit photos from any size. PLEASE do not embed your photos in an MSWord document!

Photos of birds or any other nature subject should **include a species name, location (including county), and date taken**. Photos of field trips or HCAS events should include the date, location, and names of people in the picture, if known. A useful (but not required) format for photo labels is to use the species alpha code, followed by a date, followed by a location. So, a photo of a Black-throated Blue Warbler taken on JUN 18 on the Profile Trail might look like: BTBW20180618Profile. Bird species alpha codes for the Carolinas can be found at: <https://www.carolinabirdclub.org/bandcodes.html>. Knowing, or at least knowing where to access these alpha codes can come in very handy for all kinds of reasons!

Events announcements intended for the HCAS calendar should first be submitted to the Programs and Field Trips Chair.

Please contact me with questions! Owlhooter@aol.com

Your feedback is welcome too!

Steve Dowlan, Editor, High Country Hoots



High Country Audubon Society

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