



Cape Fear Audubon members, Chuck Carmack (with beard) and Mark Jones (with binoculars), show students birds through a scope



An American Goldfinch discovers a new winter buffet

Brunswick Wildlife A Groovy Day for a Bird Count

I looked out over a sea of young faces and heard little laughter. I had just served up one of my best one-liners. At another point of my presentation, they laughed...and I wasn't trying to be funny.

I wasn't worried, however, because they were attentive and excited about the project. A communications gap was to be expected as a sixty-something geezer explained the basics of bird identification to 84 high school freshmen (and their six teachers).

Claire McLaughlin, Chemistry and Earth Science Teacher, with the Early College High School at Brunswick Community College (BCC) attended a Cape Fear Audubon Society (CFAS) meeting in Southport looking for help at school with the Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC).

Cary Paynter, CFAS President, asked me to investigate. Claire and I quickly began a plan that evolved as the project progressed. She chose Friday, February 12, the first day of the GBBC, to conduct their count so we had a month after the students returned from Christmas vacation to prepare.

The 13th annual GBBC, sponsored by National Audubon and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, was held February 12-15, 2010. Many species, like the Ruby-crowned Kinglet and Palm Warbler, breed in remote places so GBBC statistics are very important for giving scientists knowledge of their status.

Bird populations vary naturally from year to year so a decline in a species at your feeders is probably not cause for concern. Also, the number of birds coming to feed may change daily based on the availability of natural food, weather, and dietary requirements. This variability

demonstrates why the more data gathered during the count, the better the scientific information statistically derived from it.

My next step was the presentation, covering basic bird anatomy and identification skills, 40+ slides of photos of species most likely to be encountered, best feeder practices, and “backyard disasters” students might need to avoid at their feeders.

We provided each student a GBBC informational brochure, a bird checklist, and an external anatomical bird diagram. Also, I provided the presentation on CD so they could replicate it on their computers for study.

Claire and I decided we had enough time to install feeders for the students to use for identification practice, to learn how to maintain feeders, and for the actual count. Cary agreed with our proposal and that CFAS would pay for the feeders if the school would buy the food.

We were off to Wild Birds and Gardens, a CFAS-sponsor. Jill Peleuses, owner and fellow CFAS member, helped select a feeder configuration and initial food supply and gave us an educational discount. Back at BCC, the feeder installation and fill-up was a group effort, with many students and teachers participating while the others watched.

This type project was new to CFAS; however, from start to finish, the dedication of CFAS in encouraging kids to become involved with wildlife and conservation is evident. By the way, no one should be offended by “kids”. If you are an old guy like me, you can respectfully call most folks a “kid”.

Cary and her husband David; Melinda and Bruce Jones; Chuck Carmack; and Mark Jones volunteered to join the teams and assist with identification, while introducing birding skills to the kids.

In early February, Claire and I conducted a walkthrough, using the BCC campus map to define each count area. We divided the campus into three large areas and the students into six teams...two shifts to cover each area. To prevent double-counting, bird checklists would be reviewed and the highest number of birds per species extracted.

Claire did a wonderful job of leading students and teachers and providing learning activities during the pre-count period. They divided the bird list among the four freshmen “houses” and made each house responsible for learning about and being able to identify their birds.

Students were taught estimation techniques so that during the count, if they saw a large flock of birds, they would be better prepared to estimate their number. They then practiced the estimation method using beads.

All freshmen students learn a note-taking methodology using a system developed at Cornell. During the pre-count period, they viewed an episode of PBS’s “The Life of Birds” to practice this skill.

Finally, each student was assigned a specific date for filling and cleaning feeders and documenting observations in the class's bird log. Students used descriptive writing techniques taught in their English class to compose bird log entries.

As of February 22, with the March 1 deadline for results entry approaching, preliminary GBBC numbers included observations of over 10 million birds representing 591 species.

Our three teams recorded a total of 157 birds of 29 different species. This is good for a college campus in mid-winter. Not many colleges, however, are blessed with a creek, beaver pond, wet bottomlands, an eagle's nest, and overwintering (and increasingly-rare) Rusty Blackbirds.

Our best sighting was the eagles. We set up a telescope in the parking lot high above the beaver pond and funneled everyone by to take a look at the nest through the scope.

The eaglets were about a week old on count day based on when the adults finalized the annual repair of their nest and began to incubate eggs. Earlier in the pre-count week, I watched the eagle on the nest tearing prey apart, feeding their young, and eating a portion themselves. On count day, students got to see this action and several actually saw one of the hatchlings.

Because both adults shared incubation duties and continued with shared brooding we could not tell which was mom and which was dad; however, a couple of "deliveries" were made during our observation and the nest eagle and hunting eagle switched roles.

Of the eagle experience, student Annie Lafave shirked: "Look! It's getting it's yummy on! I totally understood that.

Of the learning and hands-on experience we provided the students, I just said: "Groovy!"

John Ennis



Student Austin Rowell put the finishing touches on the feeder hanger



Student Austin Rowell entered Team B's report with teacher Lorry Fitzpatrick



Students enjoyed viewing report maps at the national, state, and Lower Cape Fear levels on the GBBC website

Statistics from 2009

Total Checklists Submitted: 94,165

Total Species Observed: 620

Total Individual Birds Counted: 11,558,638

Updated: February 10, 2010 4:40:08 PM EST

Statistics from 2010

Total Checklists Submitted: 88,872

Total Species Observed: 591

Total Individual Birds Counted: 10,339,901

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