



Male Rusty Blackbirds' black breeding plumage is developed over several months as the rusty edges of their feathers wear off



As the sun sets over Ft. Fisher's Battle Acre, a mockingbird guards its territory from atop the Confederate memorial

Brunswick Wildlife Birding is a Battlefield

At battlefields, forts, and other historic sites history is just there for the taking. It turns out many are also for the birds. It is easy to see why...older trees for nesting; protected open spaces; creeks and other water structures; grounds covered with nuts of forest trees such as beechnuts and acorns; and ornamental, fruit-bearing trees that provide winter food stocks.

Locally the domains of history and birding often intersect on the battlefield. Brunswick Town/Ft. Anderson, Moore's Creek Battlefield, and Ft. Fisher are sites on the NC Birding Trail. The trail's website <http://www.ncbirdingtrail.org/> provides maps and site descriptions. Click on "Trails" and then "Coast".

From Valley Forge to Wounded Knee to San Francisco's Presidio to the above local sites, I have enjoyed birding battlefields across the nation. However, the recent reenactment of Ft. Anderson and Town Creek battles at Brunswick Town was my first reenactment. I enjoyed spending the better part of three days watching and photographing battles and birds.

The most important winter visitor to this site is the Rusty Blackbird. Populations of this species may have declined as much as 90% over the last fifty years and scientists are searching for reasons.

On Friday afternoon, while observing the set-up for the reenactment, 50 plus Rusties flew over me and perched high in a tree over the wooded wetlands. They seemed to have flown in to roost. They were loud...at least half were vocalizing and quickly taught me their “rusty hinge” call.

On Sunday, between the artillery demonstrations and the battle reenactment, I had plenty of time to bird. Occasional calls led me to a flock of Rusties foraging around the edges of the wetland.

Soon many flew to nearby oaks and the acorns underneath. I had great looks and photo ops; however, other humans came down the path and flushed the birds. I’ll return in the solitude of a weekday morning for another adventure before the Rusties head north.

After talking to several reenactors, I understood that their “living history” participation is like reality television. Reenactors strive for accuracy, to stay “in period” with dress and skills. One guy, for example, proudly told me about his son who joined their regiment at an early age, had grown into the job of drummer, and would soon be old enough to carry a musket.

The following weekend I attended the ceremony for the 234th anniversary of the Battle at Moore’s Creek Bridge. It is not a reenactment as such but more of a two-day celebration with musket, sword, and cannon demonstrations; memorials; living history camps; Celtic music; educational displays; history presentations; and story telling.

Moore’s Creek was the first Revolutionary War battle in North Carolina. It was relatively minor in size; however, its impact on the war was significant.

The Patriot victory over the Loyalists plus a later victory at Sullivan’s Island, SC ended British hopes of a quick and easy end to the rebellion in the southern colonies. The thrashing reduced Loyalist opposition while strengthening the Patriot cause and increasing their morale. Consequently North Carolina’s provincial assembly approved the Halifax Resolve, instructing the colony’s Continental Congress delegates to vote for independence.

At the memorial ceremony, the Guilford Fife & Drum Corps led the wreath laying procession to the Grady Monument. Their spirited rendition of “Yankee Doodle” was appreciated by the crowd but not the birds. The monument honors John Grady of Duplin County, the only Patriot killed.

In the mid-1950’s, Moore’s Creek was the first battlefield I ever visited. My families are from Duplin and Sampson Counties and several ancestors were members of the Patriot forces at Moore’s Creek. Surprisingly my visit brought back memories of stories told by parents, grandparents, and aunts and uncles.

I will return in May and delve more into family history after a morning of birding. In my experience, spring and early summer are the best birding for this site. After covering the visitor center area and the trailspast the monuments down to the bridge, be sure to drive around to the picnic area for additional birding opportunities with easier access to the creek.

The Ft. Fisher birding trail site, which includes the NC Aquarium, Federal Point, and Zeke's Island, is arguably the finest birding site in the Lower Cape Fear. Its 2010 reenactment is long gone but that is no problem since there is plenty to see. Most of the fort's sea face has been eroded and the naval bombardment is beyond reenactment; however, Ft. Fisher has a "living" fiber-optic battle map, a museum and bookstore, a video presentation, and restored batteries with walking trails.

Birding is fantastic during fall migration and winter and fairly good the remainder of the year. During the warm months and through the fall Monarch migration, butterfly watching and photography are great.

Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia was supplied via railroad from Wilmington. It was the last open seaport available to blockade runners. They entered the Cape Fear River through New Inlet which was protected by Ft Fisher, making the fort the key to the survival of the Confederacy.

The first Ft. Fisher bombardment on Dec 24-25, 1864 was temporarily abandoned due to blunders that cost General Benjamin Butler, commander of the land attack, his job. The second bombardment of what was considered one of the world's strongest forts began on January 13, 1865. This attack featuring 58 warships, with ten thousand troops under new leadership attacking the fort's land face, was successful.

The fort was surrendered on January 15. On January 16, Confederates evacuated Fort Holmes on Smith's Island, and Forts Campbell and Caswell on Oak Island.

Union forces began the bombardment of Fort Anderson on February 18 and captured it the following day. Their march to Wilmington included skirmishes at Town Creek and Eagles Island. Bombardment of Wilmington led to its occupation on February 22. It was the beginning of the end.

Interested in birds and battles? A good sample of living history may be experienced at the 145th anniversary reenactment at Bentonville Battlefield State Historic Site during the March 20-21 weekend. This large event includes four thousand plus reenactors. Tickets are available online: <http://www.bentonvillebattlefield.com/ticket.html>.

Bentonville is not a birding trail site; however, a great trail site is nearby Howell Woods off Devil's Racetrack Road: www.johnstoncc.edu/howellwoods. Avian prizes such as Swainson's, Kentucky, and Hooded Warblers may be found during the spring and summer.

Not to worry, I am not becoming a reenactment junkie. I am not planning to go to Bentonville. I will, however, keep an eye on the future as a nationwide round of reenactments will be held commemorating the Civil War Sesquicentennial beginning in 2011 and ending in 2015: <http://www.nccivilwar150.com/>.

I'll also keep an eye out in case they ever reenact the naval bombardment at Ft. Fisher. That would be sweet!

John Ennis



**Procession Marching to Grady Monument
at Moore's Creek**



**The Guilford Fife & Drum Corps led the wreath
laying procession to the Grady Monument at Moore's
Creek Battlefield. Their spirited rendition of "Yankee
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Ft. Anderson Reenactment



Female Rusty Blackbird at Brunswick Town/Ft. Anderson



Rusty Blackbird stalking acorn chips at Brunswick Town/Ft Anderson