



The early morning sun backlights one of Southport's beautiful steeples



Enjoying sunrise in front of the Southport Rescue Squad on a cold Sunday

## **Brunswick Wildlife Giving Thanks**

On Thanksgiving Day I took my traditional "over-the-river-and-through-the-woods" walk...a low-keyed meander of a couple of hours. It was a meditation on things I have to be thankful for and on the extravagant feast to come; with hope against all hope the Dallas Cowboys would win their game.

This year's walk was on Town Creek, a wild and scenic river, on a crisp, cool morning without man-made noise. The creek was mirror-smooth; the reflections were brilliant with about as much fall color as Brunswick County can muster. Adjectives fail me. You just had to be there.

With absolutely no agenda, most of my time was spent standing, looking, and listening. A Red-shouldered Hawk cried out occasionally and a number of little guys appeared overhead or nearby...titmice; chickadees; sparrows; Yellow-rumped, Palm, and Pine Warblers; and one singing Dark-eyed Junco.

Pileated Woodpeckers, one on each side of the creek called, drummed, and foraged noisily but I never saw them. It was too peaceful to make a concerted effort as if looking intently would disturb nature. Through all of this, I never had my camera. Too laid back!

Standing silently, binoculars down, I watched a small bird approaching me through a dogwood that still had leaves. It was a Blue-headed Vireo feverously working the tree. It came within three feet before it flew to the next tree, all the time secure in the knowledge my camera was in the truck and not pointing in its face. I retrieved my camera but the vireo did not return.

It took a couple of minutes to register but I finally realized I was hearing the "chup" calls of a Hermit Thrush close by. Soon it was joined by a Carolina Wren and I enjoyed watching them forage for a couple of minutes.

OK, I took the thrush's picture, my only photo of the day. You can never have too many thrush images.

That afternoon, continuing through Saturday, I found the darkest depths of football-induced disappointment. I am not sure my teams have ever experienced such a crushing combination of losses over such a short time span.

The Gator's season and the Wolfpack's ACC Championship dreams went down with a loud thud much like a water buffalo biting the dust after being hit by a tranquilizer dart. And the Cowboys' season is best compared to the fate of a big, fat stink bug that happened to end up under the buffalo as it fell.

Returning to positive imagery, I am thankful for mornings in Southport. There is nothing like the early morning sun spilling into town to lift my spirits.

At least a couple of Sundays a month, I make a spiritual journey to Southport for breakfast, church, and then wildlife photography on my way home.

Afterwards I reflect on which experience was most spiritual. Church usually wins because most times it seems our pastor is speaking directly to me. Sometimes that pecan waffle or walnut-covered muffin comes close. Enjoying nature, which is always spiritual, at times finishes first or tied for first.

The Shepard Road area, out Moore Street Extension past Price's Creek, is a site I often bird on my way home. It is great for winter birding, especially for raptors such as Red-tail and Red-shouldered Hawks; Cooper's Hawk (chicken hawk); Northern Harrier (marsh hawk); American Kestrel (sparrow hawk); and Peregrine Falcon (an uncommon visitor). House Wrens, Eastern Meadowlarks, and many species of sparrows and other overwintering songbirds may also be found.

This Sunday, several raptor species, meadowlarks, and an unexpected Snow Goose were present. Kestrels, our smallest falcon, are usually found foraging from utility lines, as was the case this trip. One teased me for about an hour, flying away every time I got close, only allowing a brief photo op on my last attempt.

In good light, Kestrels may be identified by their blue-gray and rufous colors. They are close in size to the doves that may perch nearby on the same wires; however, if you cannot see the

colors, the two species may be differentiated by their silhouettes. Also, kestrels make it easy by pumping their rufous tails as they perch.

If you go, watch from the roadside and beware the fire ants. Unfortunately, the land is fenced and posted; however, the view from the road is excellent for raptors and little birds may be found in brush along the road.

I returned home in a peaceful state, determined to forget football this year and concentrate on the really important stuff. Unlike football, I don't have to wait until next year to enjoy spiritual things.

John Ennis



**Diving for a mouse: American Kestrels may be identified by their blue-gray and rufous colors. The rufous tail is easily noted as they fly away.**