



**An American Oystercatcher, a common resident of our salt marshes and beaches, posed for the ladies**



**Shorebirds provided excellent targets for spotting scope practice**

## **Brunswick Wildlife Scouting for Sparrows**

Juanita Hodge, leader of Girl Scout Cadette Troop 1358, called me and asked if I would assist them with achieving their All-About-Birds project award. A cadette troop is for girls in the 6<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grades.

My heart said 'yes' because...well because that is always my answer for projects that get more youth involved with nature. My mind, recognizing I was overcommitted, started thinking of all possible retribution I could heap on the guy that gave Juanita my name. The negative thoughts quickly melted away as we worked out a date and content for a workshop and field trip.

We met on the Saturday before Thanksgiving at the Ft. Fisher museum for basic training required by the award's criteria. Our thanks go to Amy Thornton of the Fort Fisher State Historic Site for letting us use the museum's presentation room.

The workshop started with the use and cleaning of binoculars, an orientation to field guides, and the basics of bird identification. We talked about keeping a life list of birds seen and I gave each a Carolina Bird Club checklist as a base for starting their own list.

After an hour of instruction, demonstration, and practice, we braved the cold outside for field experience. Our first bird in the parking lot was a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker...a good omen. We walked to the gazebo across the highway, overlooking the rocks and ocean.

Our goals were for them to experience using a spotting scope and finding target birds like the mockingbird that popped up on the yaupon just in front of us.

During the workshop, I gave them a handout with sparrow photos from my recent winter sparrow article. We discussed the field marks indicated on the photos for Savannah and Song Sparrows. I was hoping to find at least one of them at the rocks.

Little did I know that two sparrows would take charge. A Savannah Sparrow and then a Song Sparrow popped out to feed on grass seed just below us. We were able to study their field mark differences at length using the scope.

We finished at the federal point boat access and used the scope to get close looks at shorebirds such as Willets and American Oystercatchers.

To achieve the conservation requirement, we reviewed a brochure furnished by the great folks at Audubon North Carolina on helping beach nesting birds. We talked about the importance of the dredge spoil islands the girls had all seen from the ferry.

Oystercatchers, like other beach nesting birds, are susceptible to habitat loss and destruction caused by human encroachment; however, establishment of large coastal reserves and spoil islands have helped protect their breeding ground.

The girls' attention and desire to learn were impressive! What was equally impressive, however, was that for the day's final activity, they policed the boat access area, collecting and properly disposing of a large quantity of fishing line, hooks, and other tackle exposed at low tide. Protecting wildlife in practice!

By the way, I forgot to mention that I also say 'yes' to projects like this because I enjoy them as much as the kids. Two of my most enjoyable presentations ever were to the first graders at the Southport Christian School.

They were great! Those little hands kept popping up with questions. I anticipated that their attention might wander so I inserted an occasional mammal slide between the bird slides. Trust me there is no better attention grabber than a fawn or my yard rabbit.

They invited me back a few months later to contribute to their study of Alaska. No problem with variety because I had numerous bird, mammal, and landscape photos. However, I should have stayed away from the international dateline. They knew about meridians but that concept was a temporary show stopper. I would have actually had to bring my yard rabbit to bail me out.

Many nature-based organizations have identified the need to get young people involved in birding and wildlife conservation at the earliest possible age; however, all are struggling with how to do it.

In addition to scouting, I believe that grandparents may be a key, given the busy schedules that parents keep. For you binocular-toting geezers out there, take a grandkid birding...even if you have to borrow one from next door.

John Ennis

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**Troop 1358 at the Ft. Fisher Museum**



**Scoping the mudflats for shorebirds**



**A little binocular practice before the field trip**