

New Hope Audubon Society Newsletter



Volume 34, Number 4: July-August 2009

A Triangle Natural Almanac: Yellow Passionflower and Friends

by Patrick Coin

The passionflower family is largely tropical, but we have two local members: “Maypops”, *Passiflora incarnata*, with large purplish flowers, and the petite *Passiflora lutea*, yellow passionflower. Maypops grows in old fields, sprawling across the ground or low shrubs, but yellow passionflower grows along woodland edges and it is a rare treat to find its pale yellow flowers during the summer months. I have had some growing in my garden for several years. With plenty of light and moist soil, my plants bloom abundantly and I have been able to observe the life-stages of the plant and its insect associates.

This small vine climbs with the aid of tendrils, as do other passionflowers. The tendrils are first extended as open coils, resembling a loosely-wound watch spring. Encountering a branch or other support, the tendril’s tip wraps around it, and the rest of the tendril tightens into a coil, pulling the vine closer to its support.

This species is rich in insect associates, and it is great fun to look for them on or around the plant. Several caterpillars feed on the foliage, most notably in our area, the Variegated Fritillary. An attractive orange-and-black leaf beetle (*Disonychia discoidea*) feeds on the foliage of this and other *Passiflora*. Its strong orange-and-black pattern likely indicates that it absorbs toxic defensive compounds from its host plant. Like other passionflowers, *Passiflora lutea* has an intricate pollination mechanism. As an insect approaches the nectaries at the center of the flower, the pollen-bearing anthers are pressed down onto its head and/or back. In my garden, the mason wasp, *Monobia quadridens*, is the most avid pollinator.

Look for *Passiflora lutea* along trails and roads through woodlands where there is some direct sun during the day. It blooms primarily in July and August. The bluish berry-like fruit are popular with birds, but are not edible by humans. You may find many small plants of this species in the woodland understory, but these do not seem to bloom unless a clearing gives them some sun.

For more information on yellow passionflower and its insect associates, see: plants.usda.gov and bugguide.net.



Volunteers Needed Your Audubon Society needs you.

Short term work, we got it. Long term commitment, we got it.

I will start with the short term, our chapter has participated for many years with a booth at the Eno River Festival we need volunteers to work the booth again this year, the festival is July 3, 4, and 5 and we have slots available for each day. Please contact Robin Moran, Bo Howes, or Tom Driscoll for more information. For those looking for a long term but very manageable volunteer effort, how about coordinating our adopt-a-highway program? A mere four times a year is all that is required to make us and Stagecoach Road look our best. Please let us know if either of these efforts strike your fancy. If you don't like what you see above, just give me a call or shoot me an e-mail, we almost certainly have a volunteer need for your set of skills. Thanks in advance! **Bo Howes**

Seeking Cerulean Warblers

by Mark Kosiewski

Before my recent trip to Hendersonville, in the southwestern North Carolina mountains, I went online for some birding help. I knew I would be in a great birdwatching area, and though I would be a little late for migration, surely I could pick up a few local nesters as life birds. I'd never seen a Canada Warbler, so I put that on my wish list. Ruffed Grouse had eluded me for years, so I put that one on there too. My main goal, however, was to find a Cerulean Warbler, an increasingly rare species, but a known breeder in the southwestern part of our state.

I got some great advice from the online birding community, but none better than that of Marilyn Westphal, an Asheville biologist who monitors the Cerulean Warbler during the breeding season. Cerulean Warblers nest in a variety of habitats within their range, but within the Appalachians they have specific requirements, making it very tricky to actually locate them. According to Marilyn, the Craven Gap area of the Blue Ridge Parkway, a region about 15 minutes north of Asheville, meets these requirements. She gave me exact locations on the Parkway to pull off and listen for their songs. Then she warned me. Actually seeing a Cerulean Warbler is not an easy thing. Because this species spends most of its time in the treetops, and because the mid-May foliage had already reached the middle mountain elevations, it was likely that I would have to be very, very patient.

Once in Hendersonville, I awoke early on Saturday morning and headed north toward Asheville. Because of the countless winding turns and the devious directions of my GPS system, I didn't get to Blue Ridge Parkway until well past 8:00 a.m., but still plenty early for the birds. Black-and-White Warblers were everywhere, as were Towhees, Robins, and other songsters. Wild Turkeys were fond of this part of the Parkway, too. I counted almost 20 before I reached Craven Gap.

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At 3,000 feet on this particular morning, however, the air was foggy and unseasonably cold. I stopped first at the Bull Creek Valley Overlook, near mile marker 374, and attempted to bird in the misty chill. More Black-and-White Warblers were heard, as was a Wood Thrush. A Black-throated Blue Warbler made itself known. But I couldn't see much more than the fog, so I decided to move further on. The Lane Pinnacle Overlook, a few miles further, offered no better viewing. An Indigo Bunting was singing in a tree, and I managed to get a glimpse of a proud Chestnut-sided Warbler, only ten feet away. A little further down the road I got a great look at a Veery, standing on a guardrail. But the fog was not burning off, and it was even starting to rain. So I decided to head back to Bull Creek Valley Overlook for a few minutes, for one last chance at my target bird.

When I got back to the first overlook, a local couple, Liz and Steve, had been tracking a singing Cerulean Warbler, and had seen a shape flitting through a tree only fifty feet below us. Moments later I heard the song for the first time, a buzzy *tzeedl, tzeedl, tzeedl, tzee, tzee, tzee, tzeeeeeeee* that I liken to an old car engine turning over then starting. Five minutes later, after tantalizing us with his song at close range, the bird finally jumped out into view, only forty feet away. I didn't even have to bend my neck, as the treetop he was in was at eye level. I got the binoculars on him and I saw ... a shape. No color. No wingbars. Only a vague, shadow warbler surrounded by fog and increasing rain. Then he was gone.

I wrestled with the notion of actually counting the sighting on my life list. I had, after all, heard the song very clearly and I had seen a Cerulean Warbler in my binocular view, if only as a ghost version. Ultimately, though, my life list ethics mandated I would have to return. I thanked Liz and Steve for their help, enthusiasm, and local insights. They had helped me to get so close. As I was about to head back to Hendersonville, a Worm-eating Warbler popped up from a shrub at twenty feet away, as if to offer me some consolation for missing on my target bird.

In the days following, I managed two life birds in Transylvania County. My first Canada Warbler was seen on a clear day at Devil's Courthouse, high up on the Parkway south of Asheville. My first Blackburnian Warbler was found at a slightly lower elevation, in part of the National Forest just north of Brevard. I managed, also, to find a lot of the higher elevation species that we in the Piedmont associate with winter, including Red-breasted Nuthatch, Brown Creeper, and Golden-crowned Kinglet, plus numerous warbler species that I rarely get to see. A Broad-winged Hawk even landed within eighty feet of my car at one point. All in all, I had a very successful few days birding in the mountains. But in my mind, I wasn't going to feel complete until I found a Cerulean Warbler.

On my last day in the mountains, the fog and rain fully lifted, and I decided to make one last push north of Asheville. After a late start, I drove up to the Tanbark Ridge Tunnel, stopping on both the south and north sides to look and listen. Liz and Steve, the couple that had helped me earlier, had located a Cerulean Warbler there earlier in the week. The cars and motorcycles were

already thick in the tunnel, however, making for some unnerving bird watching. Not only did the growl of engines drown out any bird songs, tunnel entrances on the Blue Ridge Parkway are not the safest places to stand, even on the side of the road. So I headed up to the Bull Creek Valley Overlook again, a little further north.

At the Bull Creek Valley Overlook, I heard Indigo Buntings, Vireos, Ovenbirds, and various Warblers, but none with the song I was seeking. I grew impatient, so I decided to drive up to the Craggy Gardens parking lot fifteen minutes further north. I figured a high elevation hike would do me some good, and that it might change my luck. The picnic area trail at Craggy Gardens yielded a beautiful male Canada Warbler, a Black-throated Green Warbler, and another Chestnut-sided Warbler, plus some stellar views of the Mount Mitchell area. I ate lunch at 5000 feet.

After lunch, I headed back down toward my previous overlook. A Scarlet Tanager sighting further emboldened me, as it lit on a branch in full sun right next to the Parkway. Though I only had thirty minutes before I would have to head back to Asheville, and then home, I felt better about my chances to finally see a Cerulean Warbler. At two o'clock I pulled off the Parkway just north of the Bull Creek Valley Overlook, where there is a small open field. Marilyn Westphal had said in her email that this particular spot was one of the best for Cerulean Warblers, and a pair of them had been seen several times this spring. Not five seconds after I had gotten out of my car, I heard another *tzeedl, tzeedl, tzeedl, tze, tze, tze, tzeeeeeeeee*. The buzzy quality of the song is similar in tone to a Black-throated Blue Warbler, which are common on the Parkway, so my untrained ear did not register the song at first. Then I heard it again, then a third time, then a fourth. It soon clicked in my head that there was a Cerulean Warbler in a nearby tree.

Unfortunately, the tree happened to be on the western side of the Parkway, which meant that it was on the uphill slope of the mountain. Every few minutes or so, a group of motorcycles came rumbling by, but I managed to pinpoint the exact tree from which the song came. The leaves were impossibly lush. Without movement from the bird I would never see anything but foliage through my binoculars. I stood by the side of the road and waited. The bird kept singing. Another Cerulean, deeper in the forest, began to respond. But neither was showing itself, and I was growing impatient with the waiting game and the Parkway traffic.

After twenty minutes of listening, staring, and massaging my neck muscles, I finally saw some movement, a faint darting motion way up in one of the hardwoods. I very carefully lifted my binoculars. The bird was, by my estimate, some 200 feet away, due to both tree distance and my angle of view, but I finally got my glasses on him. The first thing I noticed were the white wing bars, which stood out boldly amongst all the foliage. He sang again, showing off his white undersides. Instead of cerulean blue upper feathers, this particular bird had a greenish tint to it, which I assume marked him as a juvenile. But it was clearly a Cerulean Warbler, even at this great distance. He offered about two minutes of good looks, then disappeared into the mountainside. The songs ended as abruptly as they had started, but I had actually seen the bird I had hoped to find.

Every once in a while, I come across a bird whose common name captures my imagination. When a lyrical name matches a bird's beauty and grace, as with "Swallow-tailed Kite," or "Ruby-throated Hummingbird," the bird seems to enter the realm of mythology, or, at the very least, poetic majesty. The Cerulean Warbler is such a bird for me. I am grateful to have seen one of these rare gems in our own North Carolina mountains, where the species' long-term survival is by no means certain. I drove home that afternoon under cerulean skies.

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WILDATHON 2009

The 2009 New Hope Audubon Society Wildathon, our annual fund raising activity, has already begun and it runs through July 1 and we NEED you to participate! We need your support to continue the nature advocacy and environmental work we do for Chatham, Durham, and Orange Counties. There are 3 ways to participate:

- 1. Make a financial contribution.** Contributing is one of the best ways to protect important bird and wildlife habitat here in Chapel Hill (Mason Farm) and at the Coast (Audubon Coast Islands Sanctuary).
- 2. Lead a team and/or join a team.** The Wildathon is a day where teams go out to identify and, more importantly, count bird, plant, reptile and amphibian, insect, and/or other species. Usually, donations are based on the number of species counted. Start you own team or contact me if you would like to be on a team. You do not have to be experienced to be on a team.
- 3. Help bring in donations.** Beyond making a donation yourself, participants can help raise money by soliciting donations on behalf of their team.

Your contribution is **tax deductible** and your participation will be **noted in our bi-monthly newsletter and on our website** www.newhopeaudubon.org. If you want a contribution or participation form, then check our website and look for the last newsletter or contact me. If you have any questions or would like to discuss your participation further, then please contact Tom Driscoll at (919) 932-7966 or spttdrdshnk@yahoo.com or Karsten Risk at 490-5718 or karstenrist@verizon.net. Any contribution is greatly appreciated!

The Annual Bird Seed Sale Is Coming Up

As you may already know we conduct a bird seed sale every year in conjunction with the Wild Bird Center store in Eastgate Shopping Center. Shade-grown coffee is usually included in the sale. The plan is to repeat it again this year. This is one of our big money raisers, and we hope you will let all your friends and family know about the upcoming event. The order form will be in the next newsletter. Feel free to copy it and distribute to friends and neighbors. Proceeds from this sale go to our education and outreach programs. We have an excellent education director who goes to many local elementary schools and talks with the children about birds, nature and the great outdoors. We have received several letters of thanks and appreciation for all her efforts from the various schools. We would seriously desire to continue this outreach as it is so beneficial for the children. So please help us out this year by spreading the word about the sale, and most of all placing your own order. Thank you.

Eagle Count

by Martha Girolami

The NHAS Bald Eagle count took place on Sunday, April 19, 2009. Five teams counted 40 Bald Eagles!!! There were 18 adults, 21 immature and 1 undetermined. Two young chicks were seen on a nest opposite site 6 on Morgan Creek.

An Opportunity to Invest in Your Community

NC Cooperative Extension is developing an after school program for elementary and middle school students. The program's goal is to cultivate sustainable, self-reliant children and communities. To accomplish this goal the program will offer students the opportunity to learn practical skills and sustainability concepts and technologies, as well as civic, economic, and cultural skills. The pilot program will begin with 2-3 schools in Orange and Durham Counties begin in the fall of 2009.

In order for this program to work, an organization of volunteers is needed. Volunteers will have the opportunity to teach their own skills in a way that is fun, hands-on, and experiential for the students. Session will last 45 minutes to an hour and will be scheduled between 4:30 – 5:30 PM in the afternoons. We also hope to have a training session for volunteers before school starts in the fall.

Much of the program will be connected to a school garden. One project that will help kids understand the concept of working with nature rather than working against it, would be

to attract beneficial birds, frogs, or insects to the garden to control non-beneficial insects. This would include attracting purple martins, frogs, lady bugs, etc. If you have experience with this, can share nature study or the concept of Biomimicry with children, and are interested in volunteering, please contact Mike Lanier at 245-2063 or mlanier@co.orange.nc.us.

Feeder Watch

by Tom Driscoll

When you receive this article, you should notice that there is more activity around your feeders. The babies are hatched and are hungry! Already I have had juvenile American Robins, Eastern Bluebirds, Carolina Chickadees, Tufted Titmice, Downy and Red-bellied Woodpeckers, and Eastern Towhees at my feeders. Have you noticed the babies? Their colors are often duller and you may have noticed the parents feeding them.

Since your nest boxes may not be in use now, you may want to clean out all the nesting materials and then clean out the box using a weak bleach solution. This will get rid of mites and ticks. Because Eastern Bluebirds and other birds (i.e., Carolina Chickadees and Tufted Titmice) that use these boxes usually have more than one brood per nesting season, this box could very well be occupied this summer. Keep your eyes on the empty boxes.



I now have a problem with squirrels getting on my platform feeder and my hummingbird feeders. Squirrels are very smart and they seem to go to great lengths to get bird food. At our house, I have seen them jump 7 or 8 feet from the roof to land on our platform feeder. There are electrified bird feeders that shock the squirrels or spin them around, but I don't have any experience with them. Do they work well? I recently read about a trick someone has used successfully for a year to deter their squirrels. They attached a slinky to the top and bottom of the pole. The squirrels do not climb up the pole. I haven't tried this approach yet. Please let me know if you do and it works. Also, let me know of other ways you have deterred seed stealers!

I am also interested in the myriad and interesting locations wrens have chosen for their nest sites. Please send me an email letting me know of the most unusual nesting places for your wrens. I will print a few of the stories in the next newsletter! My new email address is spttdrdshnk@yahoo.com. Thanks.

May 17th 2009 Field Trip: Looking for Migrants

by Laurie Kucharik

I found the best way for me to improve my skills as a birder was to be part of a birding field trip such as the one led by Tom Driscoll on Sunday, May 17. It was also great fun. Our group of beginner through expert birders included 4 adults: Tom, Linda and her mom Lynn, myself, and 2 children: Colyer, an experienced and very helpful 15 year old, and his younger brother, Keegan.

We first explored Bynum Bridge where we saw a Phoebe family nesting under the bridge, Indigo Buntings, a Louisiana Waterthrush and a Bald Eagle, to name a few. Of course, we all like to see new species to add to our life lists, and I appreciated Tom's patience and willingness to help us find them. I added 6 to my life list that day, including long looks at a Yellow-Billed Cuckoo and a stunning Prothonotary Warbler, plus a Yellow Throated Warbler, American Redstart, Eastern Wood-Pewee, and a Prairie Warbler.

Another thing I'm working on is recognizing and learning the songs of migrants as well as permanent residents. Next time, I should be a little more able to identify a Northern Parula and White-eyed Vireo like the ones we heard while hiking in Haw River State Park. It was even fun waiting out a brief rain shower under the trees while Collier was in search of a Kentucky Warbler.

We also went to Fire Tower Rd in Pittsboro. A difficult thing for me is to judge the actual size of a bird seen through binoculars. At first glance, even a Grackle can look as big as a Crow. That's why it was perfect when Lynn spotted an Indigo Bunting foraging on the ground right next to a Blue Grosbeak. The size comparison was right there and will be a good reference point for me for future sightings. I look forward to the next opportunity to learn more while experiencing the beauty of nature, and having fun among friends on another birding field trip.



Book Review

The Armchair Birder:

Discovering the Secret Lives of Familiar Birds
By John Yow, The University of North Carolina Press

John Yow's new book reminds us that there is no need for exotic travel to see fascinating birds. With a window, a chair, and some binoculars you can see a panoply of local exotics. In this age of instant information, you can find out more than

many of us will ever want to know about our local birds with a few key strokes or the flipping of a few pages of one the many bird books available for our convenience. If you seek minutia regarding field marks and calls and want to categorize and sort every bird you see, this book is not for you.

However, if you want to know some of the reasons why some

of the birds do some of the things that we see them do this book's a keeper. If you want to share one man's view of the visitors to his feeders and yard, take a few minutes to sit down and have look.

What this book is an excellent series of essays about the avian visitors to John Yow's yard. Yow takes us through a year of getting to know the birds in his yard. Each chapter is devoted to a different bird and how it comes to be in his yard and what are its habits. Most chapters are three to four pages in length and make for nice discrete reading experiences.

In surveying these birds Yow intersperses his own observations with references to, among others, Charlotte Hilton Green, John James Audubon, Arthur Bent, and Chapel Hill native Peter Cashwell. What Yow may lack in birding expertise is more than made up for by these references to more scholarly tomes.

Without anthropomorphizing too much, Yow points out how much these birds act like various and sundry humans we come in contact with in our daily lives. I found it to be a good and instructive read.

New Hope Audubon Society Activities Calendar

Saturday July 4 **Stream Watch with John Kent** at 8:00 a.m.

Friday, Saturday, Sunday July 3-5 **Eno River Festival**

Saturday, August 1 **Stream Watch with John Kent** at 8:00 a.m.

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