

New Hope Audubon Society Newsletter

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<http://www.newhopeaudubon.org>



Wildathon 2012

By Tom Driscoll

The 2012 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, such as building an educational bird blind for programs at the NC Botanical Gardens and helping fund a boy scout eagle project, 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 your 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 spttdrshnk@yahoo.com. Any contribution is greatly appreciated!



Confessions of a Lister Pt II by Norm Budnitz

The Obsession—a Case History

To give an example of the intricacies of the listing obsession described in Part I, here is an account of a bird seen in Gambell, Alaska, a town on the north end of St. Lawrence Island in the northern Bering Sea. Gambell is a small town that has been inhabited by Siberian Yupik people for 2,000 years. It has become an attraction for American Birding Association (ABA) listers because, being less than 40 miles from the Chukchi Peninsula in Russia, it is occasionally visited by wayward Asian migrant species that rarely show up in North America. These birds have probably been blown off course by storms or have inherent faulty navigational mechanisms built into their magnificently tiny brains. Imagine a bird that breeds in central Asia and normally migrates south or southwest to spend the winter in India or Africa. If such a bird has a built in migration mechanism that is 180° out of phase, it might just end up in Gambell—to the bird's distress, but to the delight of ABA listers.

The Yupiks have engaged in a subsistence life style for their tenure in Gambell—gathering shellfish, plants and berries, fishing, and hunting whales, walrus, and seals. For 2,000 years they have deposited the remains of their exploits in middens near their village. These 'boneyards' have accumulated organic material to depths of over 10 feet in some places. The resourceful Yupiks dig pits in the boneyards, looking for ancient artifacts, old bones, and old ivory. Yupik ivory carvers are known around the world for their expertise.

Imagine a tiny passerine being blown off course during migration. Gale force winds from the southwest carry it off the Asian continent out over the Pacific Ocean—not a comfortable situation for a tiny land bird with limited energy storage. It sees an island in the vast ocean, and on the island it sees the green 'oases' of the Gambell boneyards. It drops into a hole to get out of the blustering wind and pelting rain (or



Confessions of A Lister Pt II

sleet or snow) and perhaps to find seeds or insects to replenish its meager fat stores.

Now imagine a group of 15 to 20 eager ABA listers searching the boneyards for just such a stray. It's a cold, wet, windy, gray day. Everyone is dressed in multiple layers—long underwear, covered by fleece, covered by rain gear, gloves or mittens, hats or hoods or balaclavas. And around every neck, at least binoculars, sometimes a camera, and perhaps even a spotting scope slung over a shoulder. The birders fan out across the boneyard, climbing along the ridges between the pits, trying not to trip in the tangle of wormwood plants. Sometimes the birders go down into the pits intentionally. Sometimes a wayward step results in the disappearance of a birder, accompanied by a choice expletive or two. The cry “Birder down” is heard, followed by chuckles or words of concern if a head does not quickly appear above the lip of the hole.

It occasionally happens that as this phalanx of birders crosses the boneyard, someone kicks up a tiny flying bit of fluff that comes darting out of one hole and almost immediately disappears into another. Suddenly, the phalanx halts and all eyes, binoculars, and cameras move into hyper-alert mode. The initial observer tries to convey where the ball of fluff disappeared from view—into which hole, under which wormwood plant, beneath which walrus vertebra.

On September 9, 2010, one of those little brown jobs (LBJs) did just that. Someone scared up the bird. It flew about 50 feet and dove into a hole. About 20 of us moved together slowly across the boneyard, trying to keep our eyes on the spot where the bird disappeared. Suddenly, the bird jumped up and flew neyardaway from us another 50 feet. The bird itself was silent, but the clicking of cameras was quite audible. Did anyone get a picture? No one dared look at the digital camera screen. All eyes stayed focused on the spot where the bird was last seen. No one had seen the bird well enough to identify it, but whispers could be heard. Was it a *Phylloscopus* warbler (leaf-warbler)? An *Acrocephalus* (reed-warbler)? Maybe a *Locustella* (grasshopper-warbler)? These are three genera of Old World warblers we would love to find.

We repeated this maneuver several more times, pushing the bird south toward the end of the boneyard. The phalanx then moved sideways out of the boneyard, circled around to the south end, and started working back. We wanted to keep the bird in the boneyard so that as many people as possible could see it and/or photograph it. If the bird left the boneyard, it might never be seen again. This guy was a real skulker. Sometimes it would dive under a plant, walk on the ground under the vegetation, and be flushed up 20 feet away. Sometimes it would jump up and fly



Birders in a boneyard



Typical look of an LBJ in a boneyard
Can you see it?



Close-up of the LBJ in the photo

over our heads behind us. We would do an about face and start to work in the other direction.

After perhaps a couple of hours of this craziness, after perhaps a dozen half-second chances to glimpse the bird, after a hundred or so camera shutter releases, the LBJ had had enough. It suddenly darted up out of the boneyard, flew over to a nearby rooftop, sat for a second or two, and disappeared to the north. That was it. No one ever saw the bird again. But there were a bunch of digital images. So now to a computer.

Some of the photos showed the bird on the ground, others showed it in flight. And there were even a few of the bird on the rooftop. Most of the pictures were just fuzzy blurs. But some were clear enough to make out the wing feathers in flight or the body feathers of the bird on the ground. Was there a hint of a stripe over the eye (a supercilium)? Were there any wing bars? From the computer images, it became clear that our bird was an *Acrocephalus*, a reed-warbler. When birds in this genus are breeding, they are relatively easy to distinguish by their songs. But of course, our bird did not sing.

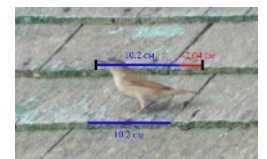
Bird banders have a special luxury when they capture a bird like this in their mist nets. They can run measurements on their captives. What is the length from the tip of the bill to the tip of the tail? How far beyond the wings does the tail project? They can examine individual feathers. Are the primary feathers even along their length, or do they show emargination, a narrowing along one edge? It turns out that in *Acrocephalus* warblers, emargination in the primaries can be diagnostic in determining species identification. This is relatively easy to see with a bird in the hand. But a bird in the bush? Through binoculars? Seen for a fraction of a second? Certainly not. But a high resolution digital image might just capture the needed information if someone was lucky enough. Pouring over the computer images hinted at emargination, but none of the pictures was quite clear enough to be absolutely certain.

The size of the bird can help in its identification. Size is extremely difficult to judge in the field unless there is an object in the picture that can be measured exactly. We had pictures of the bird on a rooftop, standing on a shingle. (Dave currently holds the title for most species (409) seen in Alaska. He is the only person to have seen more than 400 species in the state.)

If we could measure that shingle, we could get a pretty good estimate of the length of the bird. One problem: The woman who lived in that house had a reputation as being pretty cranky. The lore amongst birders was that she would



Blyth's Reed-Warbler (?)



With superimposed measurements



Cont'd from previous page

occasionally yell at us if we came too close to her house. And even some of the local Yupiks tended to give her a wide berth. The job fell to one of our fearless leaders, Aaron Lang, of Wilderness Birding Adventures, the tour group I was with. Aaron is a tall, imposing figure with an infectious smile and a personality to match. He could make friends with a wolverine. Suffice it to say that Aaron knocked on her door, talked to the woman who turned out to be pleasant and accommodating, and got permission to go up on the roof and measure that shingle. With this information, the length of the bird was estimated to be about 12.0 to 12.5 cm.

All of this information was posted on the Internet and vetted to old world warbler experts around the world. After much study and discussion, the identification settled on Blyth's Reed-Warbler, *Acrocephalus dumetorum*. If this identification were accepted by the Alaska Checklist Committee (AKCLC), it would be the very first record of this species in North America. And if the record were accepted by the AKCLC, in all likelihood, it would be accepted by the American Birding Association (ABA). And if it were accepted by the ABA, I could add it to my life list. What would the AKCLC decide? My life list hung in the balance.

After much deliberation, the AKCLC voted and, though it was agreed that the bird was almost certainly a Blyth's Reed-Warbler, the evidence was not incontrovertible. The photographs were not quite sharp enough to show, unequivocally, the emargination and other bits of evidence to secure this sighting as the first ever North American record. To quote my friend Bob Dittrick, the owner of Wilderness Birding Adventures:

We did our best and it was an exciting exercise, but evidently we came up a bit short. It is discouraging to realize that these days it takes so much. We must have had 20 people, at least 2 video cameras, 4 or 5 still cameras with over 10 thousand dollars' worth of lenses, many scopes, 20 pairs of binoculars all worth more than a thousand dollars each and chased the bird for a couple of hours – and still we failed to identify it.

And that, in a nutshell, expresses the heartbreak of being a lister.

Calendar of Activities

Saturday, June 2, **Stream Watch** with John Kent 8:00 am

Saturday, July 7, **Stream Watch** with John Kent 8:00 am



Bluebird Houses For Sale

NHAS has bluebird houses for sale for \$15.00. Now is the time to get yours as the bluebirds are pairing up and nesting. Don't be without one. See our website at www.newhopeaudubon.org to order.

These Bluebird houses have been carefully designed and constructed. Features include:

- Entrance hole diameter is just right for Bluebirds, too small for Starlings.
- Metal flashing around the entrance hole helps deter predators such as squirrels.
- Grooves on the inside of the door below the hole help the fledgling Bluebirds climb out of the nest.
- Hinged door makes it easy to clean out old nesting material.
- Written instructions included to help with proper placement and maintenance.
- Back board: 17" tall
- Box cross section: 6"wide x 6"deep.



New Hope Audubon Society Membership Meeting Presentations for Summer 2012

We don't have regularly scheduled membership meetings in June, July, and August. We take a break during the summer to allow for vacations and other pursuits. We start up again on September 6 with our annual pot luck dinner. At this meeting, everyone brings a dish to share with 6 or more people and we meet earlier at 6:30pm. This meeting is held at the North Carolina Botanical Gardens as always. Remember to bring your own plate, silverware, and cups so we can cut down on trash sent to the landfill. We also allow members to bring 10 to 15 slides of flora and or fauna from the local area or abroad to show instead of a regular speaker.

If you have any questions or ideas for speakers, then please contact Tom Driscoll at spttdrdshnk@yahoo.com.

See you in September!

Summer Field Trips

By Tom Driscoll

We don't have field trips scheduled in the summer; usually the birds start nesting and the temperatures rise so we normally take a break from field trips until late August when the fall migration begins. However, we will sometimes have impromptu field trips so keep an eye on our Facebook page or our list serve. For more information, please see our website at www.newhopeaudubon.org. Also, some of us conduct breeding bird surveys on predetermined routes. If you are interested in participating in the surveys, then please contact Tom Driscoll at spttdrdshnk@yahoo.com.

See you after the summer break!

NHAS Officers for 2012-2013

The New Hope Audubon Society has elected the following slate of officers for the 2012-2013 year. They were voted in at the May Membership Meeting.

- President - Norm Budnitz
- Vice President - Robert "Bo" Howes
- Secretary - Pat Reid
- Treasurer - Jill Paul
- Director - Robin Moran
- Director - John Kent
- Director - Mark Kosiewski



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. My suet feeders are often completely gobbled up each day.

Already my bluebirds are starting their second brood, so it's too late to clean out my nest box. If 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 again 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 have tried this approach and it seems to work. Please let me know your tricks for deterring squirrels. Also, I have problems with crows and grackles. They are eating the suet like candy. Let me know of other ways you have deterred these bird food addicts!

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 email address is spttdrdshnk@yahoo.com. Thanks.



LAKE JORDAN BALD EAGLE COUNT ON SUNDAY, April 15, 2012

By Martha Girolami, Chair

The NHAS Jordan Lake Bald Eagle count took place on Sunday, April 15, 2012 from 7 to 8:30 am. The day was sunny, breezy and about 55 degrees. The Lake level was normal. Six count sites around the Lake were monitored by ten observers. They reported 28 adult and 18 immature Bald Eagles for a total of 46.



New Hope Audubon Officers for 2011-2012

Position	Name	Phone	Email
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Director	John Kent	919-933-5650	jjkent25@gmail.com
Director	Steve Foster	919-294-8878	sfoster239@gmail.com

Committee Chairs and Special Projects

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Education Chair	Vacant		
Field Trip Chair	Vacant		
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Membership Chair	Tom Driscoll	919-932-7966	spttdrdshnk@yahoo.com
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Eagle Count	Martha Girolami	919-362-5759	mgirolami@mac.com
Eagle Platform	Robert "Bo" Howes	919-370-3202	rchowes007@hotmail.com
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Important Bird Areas: Jordan Lake Chair	Robert "Bo" Howes	919-370-3202	rchowes007@hotmail.com
Stream Watch	John Kent	919-933-5650	jjkent25@gmail.com
Wildathon Chair	Tom Driscoll	919-932-7966	spttdrdshnk@yahoo.com