

# Georgia WILD Newsletter: September 2009

## Table of Contents

**TALON: The teen birding camp that soared .....1**

### TALON: The teen birding camp that soared

Early in 2008, Georgia DNR's Wildlife Resources Division, Atlanta Audubon Society (AAS) and the Georgia Ornithological Society (GOS) first kicked around the notion of teaming to create a summer birding camp for teenagers. Given the fabulous success of DNR's Youth Birding Competition to that point, this seemed like the natural next step to take toward getting more young people involved with birds and conservation. All of us were enthusiastic but as so often happens, everyone got sidetracked. It wasn't until December 2008 that the idea again saw the light of day. But this time, it gathered momentum like a falcon closing on a pigeon. Our first planning meeting was at Charlie Elliott Wildlife Center Jan. 7. It became clear everyone had the same vision: Create a curriculum that introduced young birders to the world of professional ornithology, especially research and habitat management. We didn't want this to be all about making students super birders. We wanted to recruit future biologists and science teachers to the team, educate voters-to-be, and give these young people some of the tools needed to teach their friends the conservation message. And along the way, we planned to have a great time birding like crazy.

In its formative stages, the nestling looked manageable. The only lengthy debate concerned what to name the camp. Dan Vickers settled that with a clever acronym: TALON, Teen Adventures Learning Ornithology and Nature. We now had a vision, a team and a name. Just one more minor problem: We had about two months to decide and advertise the details. We assumed that by April most parents would have made summer plans for their teens. By now most of you have probably heard the camp successfully fledged in mid-June at Epworth by the Sea on St. Simons Island. Six chaperones took turns guiding 10 eager teens up and down the Georgia coast by bus for six days of birding and biology instruction. The formula for each day looked like this: Get an early start, visit a refuge or management area until noon, head back to St. Simons Island for a break, birdwatch at a nearby beach for two hours in the late afternoon, break for dinner, and conclude the day with a couple of hours of classroom instruction. Sure, we worried that the schedule might be too ambitious, just as we worried that the teens would out-endure the chaperones. But we figured we could adjust the schedule on the fly, and why wouldn't the teens be ready to crash early each night after such action-packed days?

Okay, so maybe we were a bit naïve.

Monday morning June 15 started at Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge with Peter Range holding up a mist-netted male painted bunting before the eyes of 10 astonished and now fully-awake teens, as he demonstrated how to age, sex, measure and band a bird. If that didn't turn

them on to birds, nothing would. Of course, the other way to view this was how were we going to top day one?

We needn't have worried. The field trips and the birds couldn't have been better. Students were treated to an up-close encounter with an absolutely throbbing wood stork rookery, the dazzling sight of flocks of roseate spoonbills, black-bellied whistling ducks and white and glossy ibis swirling over an Altamaha marsh, a peek into an active red-cockaded woodpecker nest, and an opportunity to hold a Bachman's sparrow at Fort Stewart.

There was also a full day shore-birding and seine-netting fish on Little St. Simons Island, and so much birding on Jekyll Island and at Goulds Inlet that even the students were weary (in a happy way) by Thursday night. In fact, they were so birded out that they elected to spend Friday morning, the last day of camp, visiting the Sea Turtle Center on Jekyll Island!

Thanks to teaching efforts by Tim Keyes, Dan Vickers and Bob Sargent, the evenings were filled with programs about the ecological values of birds, how to learn songs, bird photography, and how to census birds. To add spice to the classes, students were challenged each night to identify at least six birds by sight or sound, and awarded points for each correct identification. Luke Theodorou won after tying with Mac McCall and winning a head-to-head competition. Luke received a copy of *Birdwatcher*, a biography of Roger Tory Peterson. Prizes, including field guides and binoculars, were awarded to students for a variety of accomplishments.

After nearly a year of wobbling on the rim of the nest, Camp TALON not only fledged, it soared. Of course, it's hard to mess something like this up when you've got the Georgia coast and all its jewels as your playground, along with the supporting resources of DNR, AAS, GOS and TERN.

But the success of the camp is primarily attributable to the organizational gifts of Julie Duncan, Mary Terry and Walt Lane, and the immeasurable skills of the biologists who gave hours of their time to teach the teens: Dot Bambach, Larry Carlile, Brooks Good, Stacia Hendricks, Mary Moffat, Peter Range and Brad Winn. Thank you all.

The teens of Camp TALON will see you again next year.