

The Birds of Guilford County, NC: Then and Now

When one has the opportunity to do so, it is always interesting to compare the birds of today with those of earlier times. In this piece, we look at the birds of Guilford County as they were reported 50 and more years ago, taking into consideration changes in habitat and in the practices and paraphernalia of birders. One can speculate about how changes in these factors may help explain differences in the distribution and abundance of our local birds then and now.

“Then” refers to species reported from 1893 to early 1954. A committee of the Piedmont Bird Club (PBC), chaired by Dr. Charlotte Dawley, professor of biology at UNC-G (then Woman’s College of the University of North Carolina), reviewed reports of sightings that occurred during this 61-year period. The committee’s results were published in *The Chat*, the official publication of the Carolina Bird Club (CBC). During the 61 years covered by Dawley’s annotated checklist, 228 species (as well as two subspecies – Western Palm Warbler and Oregon Junco) had been reported from Guilford County.

“Now” refers to late autumn in 2014, 60 years after the publication of Dawley (1954). Between “then” and “now,” birders have added 79 species to Dawley’s checklist. According to the CBC’s latest figures, 306 species have now been reported from Guilford County. (The 307th -King Rail - has not yet been accepted.)

Changes in Habitat and Birding Practices

In 1900, Guilford County’s population stood at 39,074. By 1950, that figure had ballooned to 191,057, climbing to 488,406 by 2010, and topping 500,000 in 2014. Coupled with the surging population, changes occurred in habitats. Dawley describes the situation 60 years ago:

There are two large towns in Guilford County – Greensboro in the center and High Point in the southwestern corner. The rest of the county, aside from a few smaller villages, is farms and woods. Corn, wheat and tobacco are the principal crops, with a little cotton, and lately a few cattle. The woods are largely pine or mixed hardwood, with the various oaks predominating (p. 30).

Today, Greensboro is the third largest city in the state. High Point and Jamestown are burgeoning in the southwest, and the “villages” have morphed into suburbs. While the small farms, fields, and forests described by Dawley (1954) still exist, they do so in greatly reduced form. Infrastructure that has grown to support the increased population includes intricate road networks, an impressive interstate highway system, and a greatly expanded airport with substantial industrial development nearby. Many of these changes have been tough on several bird species that prosper in more rural and agrarian settings.

But not all of the changes in infrastructure have been detrimental to birds. To support residential and commercial development, water was needed. These needs began to be

addressed shortly after Dawley had taken stock of the county's birds. Prior to 1954, the two most prominent bodies of water in the county were Lakes Brandt and Jeannette. Lake Higgins was built in 1956. Brandt, constructed in 1925, underwent major modifications in 1958 to raise it to its present levels. Lake Townsend was constructed in 1969. Oak Hollow Reservoir was opened to the public in 1972. Randleman Reservoir, a portion of which juts into the county, is the latest (2010) water project in this series. These developments have had a felicitous effect on bird species that visit large bodies of water or their shorelines.

Birding has also changed. Prior to 1954, birders were seriously challenged. There were far fewer of them. Communication (e.g., "quickly getting the word out") was more difficult. Optical equipment, unlike what we take for granted today, was a work in progress. Field guides were rudimentary, often rendering identification difficult (even if one resorted to collecting specimens). Recording devices, for capturing and reproducing visual images or audio, were in their infancy. Record keeping was tedious, there being no capabilities such as eBird, etc. Given these difficulties, it is amazing that the earlier birders of Guilford County were able to identify and catalogue as many species as they did.

Changes in Distribution and Abundance

There are a number of different ways to consider the birds reported by Dawley versus those that have been recorded during the subsequent 60 years. Firstly, have any species mentioned by Dawley not been recorded since 1954? We might term these "oldies but goodies." Secondly, one can look at the 79 species recorded more recently, which were not mentioned in Dawley's (1954) article. These additions presumably consist of accidental, migratory, and pioneering species. Lastly, one can consider whether the fortunes of birds relatively common in both time periods have changed – some increasing in abundance while others have declined. We'll attempt to deal with this latter topic in a subsequent article.

Oldies but Goodies – Dawley (1954) lists six species that have not been reported since the time of her article: King Rail, Yellow Rail, Purple Gallinule, Short-eared Owl, Bewick's Wren, and Bachman's Sparrow. The first three typically inhabit marshes or wet meadows and today such habitat is in short supply. Short-eared Owls show a preference for overgrown fields, which provide cover for the owls' prey. Given current multi-cut haying practices (think golf course fairways), the overgrown field habitat has all but disappeared. For unknown reasons, Bewick's Wren has been largely extirpated from the eastern US, although it is still relatively common out west. Bachman's Sparrow, once an uncommon summer breeding bird in southern Virginia as well as the Piedmont of North Carolina, has shifted farther south. To this set of six oldies, we probably should add a seventh – Snowy Owl. Back "then" this northern beauty was said to "occasionally wander down from the north in January or February" (Dawley, 1954, p. 34). There has only been one recent report from our area, and that report was not confirmed by other observers or photographs.

Recent Additions – Most of the 79 species that have been added since 1954 can be described as rare, casual, or accidental. In other words, there have been very few reports of these species over the past 60 years. Included among them are such one-time wonders as: Harlequin Duck, Anhinga, Roseate Spoonbill, Whimbrel, Black-necked Stilt, Northern Saw-whet Owl, and others. Table I lists 69 of these accidental species. It is noteworthy that 44 have an affinity for larger bodies of water or their shorelines. One can speculate that the variety of geese, swans, ducks, terns, gulls, and shorebirds added to Dawley’s list is associated with more and larger reservoirs. One may also assume that better optics have undoubtedly helped pin down the identification of these visitors.

TABLE I
Rare or Accidental Visitors Since 1954

Species	Species	Species
Greater White-fronted Goose	Golden Eagle	Pomarine Jaeger
Ross's Goose	Merlin	Eurasian Collared-Dove
Cackling Goose	Clapper Rail	Common Ground-Dove
Tundra Swan	Sandhill Crane	Northern Saw-whet Owl
Eurasian Wigeon	Black-bellied Plover	Broad-tailed Hummingbird
Harlequin Duck	American Golden-Plover	Rufous Hummingbird
White-winged Scoter	Piping Plover	Calliope Hummingbird
Black Scoter	American Avocet	Olive-sided Flycatcher
Ruffed Grouse	Black-necked Stilt	Yellow-bellied Flycatcher
Pacific Loon	Willet	Sedge Wren
Western Grebe	Whimbrel	Black-throated Gray Warbler
Eared Grebe	Ruddy Turnstone	Swainson's Warbler
American White Pelican	Sanderling	Mourning Warbler
Brown Pelican	Baird's Sandpiper	Lark Sparrow
Great Cormorant	Stilt Sandpiper	Nelson's Sparrow
Anhinga	Buff-breasted Sandpiper	Lapland Longspur
Tricolored Heron	Dowitchers (L-b, & S-b)	Dickcissel
Cattle Egret	Red-necked Phalarope	Black-headed Grosbeak
Glossy Ibis	Red Phalarope	Painted Bunting
Roseate Spoonbill	Glaucous Gull	Yellow-headed Blackbird
American Swallow-tailed Kite	Lesser Black-backed Gull	Pine Grosbeak
Northern Goshawk	Great Black-backed Gull	White-winged Crossbill
Rough-legged Hawk	Royal Tern	Lazuli Bunting

Ten recent additions are not accidental visitors. The first two - Mute Swan and Rock Pigeon - consist of introduced species that either were not present in Dawley’s time or were not considered to be native wild birds. It is likely that both were intentionally excluded from her list. Both are familiar birds today, especially the Rock Pigeon.

The eight additional new species include both migrant and nesting birds. Migratory species not reported by Dawley, which have become nearly annual visitors, include: Red-throated Loon, Forster's Tern, and Wilson's Warbler.

The pioneering or new nesting species occur in small numbers or at specific locations. These pioneers include: Mississippi Kite, Willow Flycatcher, Fish Crow, and (probably) Common Raven. The most abundant new nesting species is undoubtedly the House Finch. Originally it was only found west of the Rockies. In 1940, caged birds were released on Long Island, NY. From there they spread throughout the East.

Other Changes in Distribution and Abundance – In this article we have focused on species that were reported before 1954 but not since then and, conversely, on species that have appeared on the scene since 1954. But what has happened to species that were present during both periods? Have their numbers declined or increased? Has their status as migrants or nesters changed? In a future piece we will offer some judgments, realizing that answers to such questions must be largely based on impressions because of the lack of hard data.

Literature Cited

Dawley, Charlotte Webster. 1954. The birds of Guilford County, North Carolina. *The Chat*: Vol. 18, No. 2, pp.30-40.

Internet Resource

The_Chat_Vol_18_No_2_pp30-40.pdf