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GOS RINGS IN ITS 75TH BIRTHDAY IN STYLE

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The society celebrated the 75th anniversary of its founding during the winter meeting held 14-17 January 2011 at the Ocean Plaza Beach Resort on Tybee Island. The seed that germinated into this meeting was planted by the GOS Executive Committee in the fall of 2009, and the speakers were invited 12-15 months in advance. When we first discussed the framework for this anniversary gala, it was clear that it must be held during either the society's winter or fall meeting. The attendance at spring meetings is generally smaller by comparison due to many other conflicting events in the state. As it turned out, the winter meeting was the best choice for the event because of the availability of the selected guest speakers. More than a year has elapsed since that momentous weekend, yet I still vividly recall the stunned feeling that settled over me when I woke up on the morning of the 17th and realized that all of it—the long meetings, the dozens of formal letters, the hundreds of e-mails and phone calls, the endless checklist of tasks-to-do—was over. The pace was so frenetic that weekend that it's tempting to say that it flashed by us in a kaleidoscopic blur, but that wouldn't be true. It's no exaggeration when I say that all of us who were there, and there were 198 people registered, have vivid, lingering memories of that weekend.

Fridays at GOS meetings usually feature an after-dinner get-together to enjoy a presentation and to get an overview of Saturday's field trip schedule. Friday at this meeting was loaded like a baked potato at a fast food restaurant. David Sibley, the banquet speaker, was arriving at the Savannah Airport in the early afternoon and would spend that night with a select group of members (chosen by raffle and a bidding process) on St. Catherines Island (SCI). Conservation Committee Chairman Steve Holzman was the "inside connection" who linked us to David in the first place, so Steve picked him up at the airport. En route from

Savannah to the SCI dock, Steve and David stopped at the Richmond Hill Water Treatment Facility to co-lead an afternoon birding trip with Dot Bambach. As a caravan of vehicles lined up on the side of the dirt road leading to the facility entrance, I wandered to the front of the line, scope on my shoulder, to see if I could assist Dot in some way, and there I encountered David for the first time. I congratulated him on the recent publication of his field guide about trees. He told me that he probably wouldn't produce another field guide about anything other than birds, because he felt that the time invested in writing the tree guide had diminished his birding skills. That surprising remark kept resurfacing in my mind over the next 3 hours as I witnessed this soft-spoken prodigy routinely identify one-quarter-mile-distant bird-like silhouettes.

Friday night at the hotel featured a jammed pair of parking lots and a long line of GOS members entering the Garden Room, where the registration desk was located and where Dan Vickers, Patti Newell, Cathy Ricketts, Ed Maioriello, Phil and Myra Hardy, and I greeted the registrants and handed out programs, field trip maps, restaurant information, and other materials. The society's Business Manager, Ashley Harrington, had his table set up at the back of the room, where he sold the new t-shirt complete with Sibley's painting of an American Bittern on the back, as well as a DVD featuring more than 70 years of *The Oriole*. The biggest crowd I've ever seen at a GOS meeting flowed into the room to listen to presentations by Giff Beaton and Todd Schneider, while upstairs, thanks to the initiative of Tracey Muise, teenagers listened to Tim Keyes' presentation, "Shorebird Identification for Young Birders." In keeping with the historical theme of the meeting, we asked Giff and Todd to give complementary ornithological talks about the past, present, and future. Giff's "History of Georgia Birding" was a biographical tour de force of the early southeastern naturalists and ornithologists, especially Catesby, Bartram, Abbot, Wilson, and Audubon, with a special emphasis on Georgia's pioneering ornithologists, particularly the group he referred to as the "fab five": Eugene Murphey, Herbert Stoddard, Ivan Tomkins, Thomas Burleigh, and Earle Greene. His program perfectly captured the birth of the ornithological underpinnings that crafted the blueprints for GOS' founding. No such talk would be complete without praising the contributions of some recent legends, and Giff spoke at length about the genius of Robert Norris and about Richard (Dick) Parks' lifelong devotion to the society. Fittingly, Giff ended his talk with some thoughts about Bill Terrell, the man whose astonishing gift to the society in 2005 so dramatically changed the ornithological landscape in Georgia.

Giff's trip down memory road was nicely bookended by Todd Schneider's program, "Bird Conservation in Georgia in the 21st Century: Present Efforts and Future Direction." His first topic was raptors, highlighting the remarkable recovery of the Bald Eagle in Georgia, nesting Peregrine Falcons in Atlanta, and Swallow-tailed Kite surveys. He spoke at length about projects to conserve Southeastern American Kestrels, Loggerhead Shrikes, Red-cockaded Woodpeckers, Painted Buntings, Cerulean Warblers, Golden-winged Warblers, Swainson's Warblers, Henslow's Sparrows, and Bachman's Sparrows. Todd noted that the first survey for wintering "salty" sparrows was completed a week before this meeting. He also spoke about the Georgia Department of Natural Resources' (DNR) mid-winter shorebird survey, their support of the U.S. Geological Survey's Breeding Bird Survey, and the production of *The Breeding Bird Atlas of Georgia* (captained by Todd). He concluded his talk with descriptions of nesting surveys and telemetry studies featuring American Oystercatchers, Wilson's Plovers, Whimbrels, and Marbled Godwits.

I was responsible for leading a group to Savannah National Wildlife Refuge on Saturday, one of 10 field trips scheduled that day. Normally this particular trip is a straightforward endeavor: navigate the convoy of vehicles through the Savannah maze and over the massive bridge, and then crawl along the Wildlife Drive at the refuge, stopping frequently to gawk at thousands of ducks. However, I learned the summer before this meeting that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) was closing the Wildlife Drive in order to perform repairs on water flow structures. The FWS's Jane Griess offered an alternative approach: birding by hay wagon along the dikes of the normally closed north side of the refuge. I was simultaneously intrigued and worried, because it was new and relatively unknown (to me). I needn't have worried; the dykes were excellent birding platforms, the rafts of ducks were immense, and the professionalism of the FWS staff was incomparable. I was uneasy not being in control of the driving situation, but birding by hay wagon with only the noise and distraction of one vehicle (i.e., the truck that towed the trailer) is an experience I highly recommend.

Our Saturday night banquet at the Ocean Plaza Beach Resort is usually held in the Garden Room west of the parking lots, but the facility couldn't accommodate our burgeoning flock. Instead, the members enjoyed an all-you-can-eat seafood buffet at the hotel's Dolphin Reef Restaurant. The consensus was that this was perhaps the best banquet meal we'd had. The hotel staff truly went above and beyond the call of duty. I know this first hand, because Dan Vickers and I had the manager running laps that night setting up tables and

chairs for book signings by David Sibley, the 4 editors of the breeding bird atlas (Todd Schneider, Giff Beaton, Tim Keyes, and Nathan Klaus), and by Mallory Pearce, who sold copies of his book, *The Low Country*. We also had to clear a nook in which we could wedge 8 easels so that graduate students and scientists could present their research in the midst of a blend of birders, hotel guests, barstool occupants, and pinball machines.

We were late introducing Sibley's program, "The Psychology of Bird Identification," because of the banquet meal arrangement and associated long lines and because birders had to carry full stomachs across the parking lot to the Garden Room. Since it was a special meeting, we also had more business than usual on the night's agenda. I had the privilege of introducing to the audience the 17 past presidents and/or recipients of the Earle Greene Memorial Award (EG Award) who were present that night. The highlight for all of us occurred when Dick Parks, who sat in the front row with his family, rose in response to a prolonged standing ovation when his name was called. There were several



Photo by Phil Hardy

Steve Holzman presents David Sibley with a painting of a Yellow-throated Warbler by Dick Parks while GOS President Bob Sargent looks on.

other especially accomplished members who couldn't be there, and many of them asked me to convey their thoughts, best wishes, and congratulations to the society. Norene Boring and Les Davenport were unable to make the drive; Tommy Patterson and Emil Urban had been experiencing health problems; Bob

and Martha Sargent had a conflicting engagement; Bob Manns was involved with a theatre production in Maine; and Chandler (Chan) Robbins had other commitments. I received a note via fax from Chan as I was checking into the hotel Friday night. He congratulated the society on its success, praised the state's new bird atlas, and reminisced about Tom Burleigh and the latter's efforts to secure funding from the Georgia state legislature to pay for the publication of *Georgia Birds* in 1958.

Dan Vickers followed me to the podium, announcing the results of a photo contest that he organized. Jerry Amerson's stunning picture of a Prothonotary Warbler bagged the top prize. And then we turned Steve Holzman loose with a cordless microphone to raffle a variety of prizes, including one of Dick Parks' prints, a copy of Burleigh's *Georgia Birds*, and 4 signed Sibley posters. Steve also presented a check in the amount of \$1,200 to the Savannah Riverkeeper on behalf of GOS. This money was raised through raffling tickets and soliciting high bids from members for the opportunity to spend a night and a day birding on SCI with David. Finally, Steve confined his antics to the podium, where he introduced the speaker. In short order it became clear that Steve hadn't really written an introduction. Instead, he pulled out his iPhone, Googled David's name, and proceeded to read the first entry that popped up. It wasn't the right Sibley, Steve knew it, but he kept reading in his unique hyperactive way, and then regaled us with a tale or 2 about youthful experiences with David. The result was something akin to a celebrity roast. David blushed, as did Steve, and the audience laughed for 5 minutes. David took a bit of time to regain his composure, and then spoke about how birders use shortcuts to identify birds, often relying on one or 2 key field marks, instead of learning to see and recognize the whole picture. He noted that we sometimes jump to conclusions based on species we expect to see in certain settings, and how we can convince ourselves that we're absolutely right, despite evidence to the contrary. As an example of how we can fail to see the proverbial forest for the trees, he played a video depicting a room full of people engaged in activity, telling us to focus on a particular feature associated with the people. Most of the audience dutifully became engrossed in the gyrations of the onscreen actors, failing to see the gorilla that casually strolled through the scene. The result was uproar when we realized our blindness, and the lesson made us wince.

There were 2 more activities on the agenda before we released the tired group for the night. John Swiderski, chairman of the Earle Greene Memorial Award Committee, stepped to the microphone to bestow the award on the 2011 recipient. Whispered conjecture filled the room as John explained the history

and significance of the award, and then the suspense promptly vaporized when he held up a copy of *The Breeding Bird Atlas of Georgia*. There couldn't have been a more deserving or obvious recipient for the award than Todd Schneider that night, but it seemed that almost no one saw this coming. Todd was obviously floored by the honor, as he made his way through the crowd to the podium, where he proceeded to humbly thank the society and the members in attendance. As Todd returned to his seat, plaque in hand, Bill Lotz introduced the field trip leaders for the following day.

Sunday's lineup included 8 field trips, highlighted by the all-star team of Sibley, Beaton, and Steve Calver who shepherded a trip to the Savannah Spoils Site. Sunday night featured yet another social hour at the hotel's Garden Room, only this social came with a twist. I'd seen bird call imitation contests and poetry readings about birds at meetings of the American Ornithologists' Union, so I suggested that we offer a similar event at the meeting. Several attendees braved the audience's heckling, belting out their best bird song/call renditions. Songsters included Malcolm Hodges, Rene Heidt, Mallory Pearce, and yours truly. Bob Sattelmeyer entertained the group by reading some of his favorite writings about birds, and Jordan Budnik recited a poem she wrote. Capping off the entertainment and the hilarity was a species countdown led by a cocktail-stimulated and therefore completely uninhibited Malcolm Hodges. He invented syllables none of us had ever heard uttered during a countdown. I've long admired Malcolm's wit, and he achieved new comedic standards that night. And for the record, the weekend's tally, which was compiled by Bill Lotz and Steve Holzman, was 185 species counted. (Note: The species list can be found on the society's website.)

Monday morning I found myself on the road leading a group of birders to Glennville, where we met Gene Wilkinson at the water treatment facility. Five other well-attended field trips were under way that morning—quite a lineup considering just how much had been packed into a 4-day weekend. It was gratifying to all involved to see that meeting coalesce in such a successful way. It was even more gratifying to see not just an extraordinarily large group of birders in one Georgia place to celebrate the society and birds, but especially to listen to longtime members reminiscing about the old days and exclaiming how far the society has come. If you're interested in reading the reflections of some of the meeting's attendees, see the March 2011 issue of the *GOShawk* on the society's website. Thank you to the Executive Committee for the remarkable achievement that was the 75th anniversary meeting, and thank you to all of the members, past and present, for your abiding devotion to the Georgia Ornithological Society.



Photo by Phil Hardy

Earle R. Greene Memorial Award Recipients and Past Presidents:

Front Row, L. to R. Doris Cohrs (Award 1990), Helen Ogren (President 1993-1995), Gail Russell (President 2001-2003), Richard Parks (Award 1976; the only living charter member of GOS), Sidney Gauthreaux (Award 2010), I. Lehr Brisbin (Award 1996).

Middle Row, L. to R. Kenneth Clark (Award 2001; President 1995-1999), Donald Duncan (President 1987-1989), Paul Sykes (Award 2002), James Flynn (Award 2003), Georgann Schmalz (Award 2010), Jeannie Wright (Award 2008), Todd Schneider (Award 2011), Terry Moore (Award 1992).

Back Row, L. to R. Brad Winn (Award 2006), Tim Keyes (Award 2009), Giff Beaton (Award 2004), John Swiderski (Award 1998; President 1999-2001).