For my first message of the year, I want to wish everyone a Happy and Healthy New Year. I also want to express my gratitude to all of our members and visitors who have so generously given their money and/or their time to make Manatee County Audubon Society and Felts Audubon Preserve something we can all be proud of.

As promised last month, I want to cover another topic from the Audubon of Florida Conservation Action Agenda, which was presented at the October Audubon Assembly meeting. A topic that should be very important to all of us is Energy and Climate change.

The increases in atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases (GHG) are the direct results of our day-to-day activities. Major sources of increased greenhouse gases are carbon dioxide, methane and emissions from fossil fuel use and extraction for power generation and transportation. There is scientific consensus that an increase in GHG in the atmosphere over the last century is contributing to climate change, including increased air and water temperatures leading to altered weather patterns and rising seas. Though we have some skepticism on the amount of change that exists, there is obviously a change and it appears to be created by human activities. For this, we must take responsibility.

Climate change brings a host of negative impacts for birds, other wildlife and habitat. Because of learned migration habits and the need for specialized habitat for nesting and foraging, many bird species will be significantly affected by climate change and altered seasons. These impacts, along with stresses on their environment, could lead birds to a greater risk of extinction. I think we all know some of the things we can do to have an impact:

- Advocate local, state and federal laws to set specific enforceable GHG emissions reduction goals and target levels that will stabilize the climate.
Great Backyard Bird Count set for February

By Barbara Singer

People of all ages and all levels of bird-watching experience are invited to take part in the 13th Annual Great Backyard Bird Count, scheduled for February 12-15. This is a great way to learn more about the birds in your own backyard. Whether you are brand new to watching and counting birds, or an expert birder, your count counts. Your checklist will contribute valuable information for science and conservation when you enter your birds. It’s easy to participate. Visit www.birdcount.org for instructions or pick up literature at our January 20 meeting.

Visitors count 23 species at Felts

By Fred Allen

December started out on the cool side keeping the bird population down until about 10:30 a.m. Open house turnout was low. Now that we are open every day, I think, it has taken away from the open house. On the 5th, Matt Holman from the Wild Bird Center led a two-hour walk. Eleven birders showed up and we counted 23 species including the first male Painted Bunting.

The top of the berm has been mowed and is a nice walk, with a high vantage point.

Bird counts for the first two weeks were: 1 Bald Eagle, 1 Great Horned Owl, 1 Red-shouldered Hawk, 1 Anhinga, 1 Little Blue Heron, 1 Great Blue Heron, 6 Savannah Sparrows, many Palm, Pine and Yellow Rump Warblers and a pair of American Kestrels. One of the Kestrels has taken a liking to the bat house pole for a perch.

The third week brought a freeze, browning the grass and killing some plants. The feeders are busy at certain times of the day with Goldfinch and both Painted and Indigo Buntings, Cardinals, Tufted Titmice and Mourning Doves. Catbirds and Blue Gray Gnat Catchers can be seen around the bird blind.

Most of the butterflies are concentrated on the south side including 7-8 Monarchs. The south end is the only section that still has flowering plants. There was a Red Admiral Soaking up some sun under the Oaks. Walking the berm, I was glad to see quite a few Fiery Skippers on the bidden. Not many were seen after last winter’s frost. The December 14 freeze may have killed most of the flowers, for a while.

Walk-ins seem to be on the rise. I have seen cars parked on the street on seven different days this month.

New checklists at Felts Audubon Preserve

By Lucette Wombacher

The next time you visit the bird blind at Felts Preserve you will find new checklists. As of December 20, eight more species had been seen since last January. The new birds are: Veery, Gray-cheeked Thrush, Savannah Sparrow, Chipping Sparrow, Field Sparrow, White-throated Sparrow, Marsh Wren and Muscovy Duck. This brings the total number of different species seen at the preserve to 149. Thank you to all our visitors who take the time to complete checklists. That is the only way we know which birds are visiting and living at the preserve.

During 2010, our busiest month was March, with 73 different species reported. The least busy months were July and August with only 22 species reported in each of those months. Those were also the months with the fewest checklists turned in, and undoubtedly also the fewest human visitors. The heat and humidity (and mosquitoes) kept most people away. So keep those checklists coming. If you see something new, write it in. And if you get a picture, even better.

Thanks to those who host Felts Open Houses

By Carol Webster

November 6: Mike and Marge Corso hosted 17 visitors who were mostly Audubon members. Mike reports it was a cool (48 degrees) clear morning and 32 bird species were observed. One new membership was accepted, along with a $5 donation.

December 4: Dee Hanny hosted six visitors to wind up the year. It was 39 degrees but clear with very little wind. Most notable of 29 species seen was a Great Horned Owl.
By Dick Comeau, Field Trip Chair

The male Painted Bunting is the only North American bird to be red underneath and have a blue head. It also has a bronze-green back with a red eye ring. The female painted Bunting is greenish above and a pale lemon-green below. Painted Buntings are shy, somewhat secretive and despite being so colorful are hard to spot in the scrubby bushes or undergrowth that they typically inhabit. Luckily for us they will go to our feeders, especially if we keep at least one filled with white (proso) millet which they love. Using a cage type feeder which doesn’t allow larger birds inside is beneficial for our smaller birds including the buntings.

Painted Bunting populations have declined about 60% over the years but generally breed from Missouri, east to coastal North Carolina, and south to Florida. They also have populations in Oklahoma, Texas and New Mexico. They are habitat dependent and need native scrubs, dense bushes, dense vegetation and thickets in order to nest. Golf courses and green lawns do not appeal to our Painted Buntings. The Brown-headed Cowbird has also been responsible for some nest parasitism, which also has contributed to the buntings’ decline.

We are lucky in that we can see a few Painted Buntings at our own Felts Audubon Preserve. Keep an eye out in our bird blind, especially the feeder stocked with white millet. The Painted Bunting is actually in the Cardinal family and has similar behaviors in that it is somewhat timid and is one of the first and last birds to visit our feeders each day. Besides seed, they also feed on insects, caterpillars and even spiders.

I don’t know of anyone who gets tired of seeing Painted Buntings.

Energy and Climate Change

Promote conservation, energy efficiency, green building standards, compact development programs and policies.

Encourage the implementation of state renewable electricity policies through solar, wind and other energy efficient technologies as they are developed.

Support adoption of strong vehicle emissions standards and fuel efficiency standards and oppose transportation projects that increase our dependence on passenger vehicles both from the use of fuel and the increased emissions that occur with increased vehicles.

If we all implement and support these actions, we can hold our heads up and say “we made a difference.” But if we are going to continue turning up those thermostats on a chilly day or jump in the car just to go get that one loaf of bread, we will have no one to blame but ourselves if our great-grandchildren never get to see a Painted Bunting.
Upcoming Events

Saturday 1/8
Myakka River State Park
Mike and Nancy Barnes
586-246-1003. Expect great birding at this preserve. Meet at 7:30 a.m. at Lowe’s parking lot, I-75 and SR 70 (north side of SR 70).

Tuesday 1/11
Emerson Point Palmetto
Two-hour walk with Lucette Wombacher, 776-8424, and Manatee’s Natural Resources Department. Meet at 8:30 a.m. at the Welcome Center at Emerson Point.

Wednesday 1/12
Lettuce Lake, Ybor City and Cockroach Bay.
Bob and Nancy Dean, 792-9235. Reservations required. Start at Lettuce Lake. Lunch Ybor City and tour its museum at your expense. Finish at Cockroach Bay. Depart 7 a.m. southwest corner of Walmart parking lot, 508 U.S. 301 at 10th Street East, Palmetto.

Friday-Saturday 1/14-16
Gainesville and Alachua County. Lucette Wombacher, 776-8424. Reservations necessary. Expect wintering Sandhill Cranes, sparrows, waders, ducks and others during this three-day trip.

Thursday 1/20
General Meeting
Manatee Audubon Society.
7:30 p.m.
First United Methodist Church of Palmetto, 330 11th Ave. W. Palmetto. Our speaker will be Laurel Schiller, author, educator and specialist in native Florida plants.

Looking for birds on a cold day at Emerson Point

By Lucette Wombacher
The weather was against us at Emerson Point Preserve on Tuesday December 14. It was a very cold windy day, about 38 degrees. Even the people who called saying they were used to cold weather failed to show up. However two hardy souls joined Bob and me for the walk. We had to search hard for the birds in sheltered areas and only saw 20 different species. Everyone’s favorite was the hawk perched right over the trail between the Portavant mound and the welcome center. It was sitting in the sun and would have been a beautiful photo if any of us had brought a camera. Hopefully January’s weather will be better.

Birders spot 56 species on Celery Fields trip

By Dick Comeau, trip leader
On Tuesday, November 30, after a rainy drizzly start, a small group of adventurous birders joined a Manatee County Audubon sponsored trip to the newly redesigned Celery Fields and areas in East Sarasota. The project by Sarasota County is a work in progress but the area has the real potential for becoming a birder’s and photographer’s paradise and could become a real showcase of what can be done in regards to our Florida wetlands. With various plantings of native marsh grasses, reeds, and so forth, along with future plans for lookouts, boardwalks and even a visitor center, which Sarasota Audubon is thinking about at this time, this area will become a major gift to our natural environment. Our birding group, after just a few hours, had a trip list of 56 species. Most of the species seen were typically specific to this type of habitat. The most uncommon bird seen on the trip was probably the female Common Goldeneye duck in a small pond off Fruitville Road near the Founders Club. We missed the female Buffleheads seen just the day before but hopefully they remain in the area. We also had Redhead and Northern Shoveler in the same pond. Black-necked Stilt, Wilson’s snipe, Short-billed Dowitcher, both Yellowlegs, many Roseate Spoonbills, Caspian Tern and an adult Bald Eagle all highlighted our list.

Counting birds at Christmas

By David Williamson, CBC coordinator
We had 24 volunteers for the 29th consecutive Christmas Bird Count on Anna Maria Island (known as the Gulf Circle count) and we counted more than 7,250 individual birds, slightly down from the last two counts. We saw 96 species, which is excellent, the second highest number of species we have seen before. Look for more details on this count and the Bradenton Circle count in the next newsletter.

Send your items for The Night Heron to newsletter editor Molly McCartney at msmccartney@sprintmail.com or call 778-3228