



2011 Meetings

- Monday, May 23 SANDHILLS WILDFLOWERS. Join Bruce Sorrie, Biologist with the NC Heritage Program and President of the Sandhills Natural History Society, to hear about his new field guide to the wildflowers of the Sandhills. Bruce will discuss the makeup of his field guide, and show selected habitats and their plants.
- Monday, June 27 POTLUCK! Bring your favorite dish and a natural history item or no more than five photos to share.
- Monday, July 25 BEES. Join Hugh Madison to hear the buzz about honey bees. Hugh will talk about the different types of honey bees, their division of labor lifestyle, pollination, how important honey bees are to our food chain, life expectancy of the bees, how they make honey, and the different things for which bees forage.
- Monday, August 22 SANDHILLS GEOLOGY. Join Bob Ganis to learn the basics of Sandhills geology, and how it has shaped our plant and animal life.
- Meeting Times: 7:00 p.m. - Fellowship and Socializing. 7:30 p.m. - Meeting and Program.
Program Location: Weymouth Woods Visitors' Center Auditorium.
Phone 910-692-2167 for directions.

*** We normally meet on the 4th Monday of each month. ***

Upcoming Field Trips

- May 21** **Ft. Bragg Red-cockaded Woodpecker Banding plus Wildflowers.** Beth Evans of Ft. Bragg's Endangered Species Program will band RCW nestlings in the field and discuss the critical work of her program. Later, Bruce Sorrie will bring us to a botanical hotspot or two to see orchids and pitcher-plants. This is a joint program with SOS; and therefore is limited to 10 people from each group. You must sign up with Bruce Sorrie. If there are more than 10 people from our group who want to go, names will be drawn from a hat. Bring your lunch. We will leave from Weymouth Woods. You will be notified of the time to meet.
Trip Leader: Bruce Sorrie – bruce.sorrie@ncdenr.gov

June 8

Lumber River Canoe/Kayak Trip. This is a WEDNESDAY trip. A weekday is best to meet the park's staff schedule. Jeffery Davidson, Lumber River State Park Ranger, will be our guide to see cypress-gum swamp forest, Prothonotary Warblers, etc. The starting time is 10:00 a.m. We will meet and put-in at Chalk Banks on U.S. 401 and a take-out at SR 1310/1433, a paddle distance of 11.6 miles and duration of five hours. The trip will be limited to 10 people, so be sure to sign up early. Bring your own canoe or kayak if you wish. Also bring water, lunch, sunscreen, life jackets, etc.

The SNHS contact person for sign-up and directions is David McCloy (dmcloy@mindspring.com; 910-692-5094). Canoes and life jackets are available at no charge through Lumber River State Park. Please let David know if you wish to reserve these so he can contact Jeffery Davidson to make arrangements. All reservations should be in by June 1.

August 27

Sandhills Geology. Join Bob Ganis to see examples of Sandhills geology on the Saturday following his Monday evening program. Watch for more details coming soon.

IMPORTANT: *Call or email the field trip leader to register for a trip. Please do so at least one day before the trip to ensure that the trip is still on schedule.*

Trip Leaders Needed

We receive a lot of trip ideas from members; what we need are members to lead these trips. You don't necessarily have to be an expert to lead a trip. You just need to be willing to schedule, meet, and do the logistics. So please consider leading one of the following:

Falls Lake-Triangle Lakes for waterfowl
Uwharrie National Forest
Bay Lakes
Bog Turtle search

If you have other field trip ideas or would be willing to lead one of these trips, please contact the Field Trip Directors: David McCloy, Carol Bowman, or Jeff Beane.

Trip Reports

Woodlake Bird Walk February 19

Leaders: Carol Bowman & Linda Jones

Several members joined Carol and Linda for a half day of birding around Woodlake. The lake was extremely low due to bridge work. Only 31 species were seen, including Lesser Scaup, Ring-billed Gulls, Pied-billed Grebes, a Loggerhead Shrike, Hooded Mergansers, Pine Siskins, and a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. The highlight of the day was an adult Bald Eagle with two juveniles on one of the sandbars. They stayed around for a long time and gave us great looks!

Blewett Falls Lake and Grassy Island Road

March 19

Trip Leader: Bruce Sorrie

Nine folks joined Bruce for a perfect day—clear and sunny, cool until late morning, then nice and warm. In the large fields at the junction of Roseland and Hoffman Roads in Moore County we saw Eastern Meadowlark, Eastern Bluebird, Killdeer, Wild Turkey gobbling, American Robins, and Mourning Doves. On Grassy Island Road in the vicinity of the WRC boat ramp, at the mouth of Mountain Creek in Richmond County, we observed Great Blue Heron, Wood Duck, Red-shouldered Hawk, Pileated Woodpecker, Hairy Woodpecker, Downy

Woodpecker, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Yellow-shafted Flicker, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (calls), Eastern Phoebe, American Robin, Hermit Thrush (dead on the roadside), Carolina Wren, Brown Creeper, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Tufted Titmouse, Carolina Chickadee, American Crow, Yellow-rumped (Myrtle) Warbler, Yellow-throated Warbler, Pine Warbler, Song Sparrow, White-throated Sparrow, Northern Cardinal, Common Grackle, Tiger Swallowtail, Spring Azure, Mourning Cloak, a duskywing, a comma, Spring Peeper, and a Pickerel Frog snoring.

At Blewett Falls Dam and Lake in Richmond County were Black Vulture, Turkey Vulture, Osprey, Double-crested Cormorants (about 550!), Ring-billed Gull, Bonaparte's Gull, Belted Kingfisher, Fish Crow, Blue Jay, Yellow-throated Warbler, Rufous-sided Towhee, Falcate Orangetip, and lots of Yellow-bellied Sliders.

Photography Spotlight



A Bird's-foot Violet, found recently while doing the Spring Bird Count. This odd leaf form is found nowhere else but in the Sandhills region, and has been given the name *Viola pedata* var. *ranunculifolia*. Plants with normal leaves (deeply cut into 3-4 segments) also occur throughout the Sandhills. *Photo by Bruce Sorrie*

Creature Feature

This column spotlights in each issue a different animal, plant, or other organism occurring in the Sandhills—typically one that breeds, blooms, or is otherwise active and observable during the season in which it is featured. Members are encouraged to volunteer to write this column. If enough volunteer, it can be a regular feature. If not, it may appear only irregularly or occasionally.

Eastern Coachwhip (*Masticophis f. flagellum*)

The Coachwhip is a creature of extremes. With a record length of 8½ feet (6 ft. is more typical), it is North Carolina's longest snake, though certainly not the heaviest. In fact, it is extremely slender-bodied, as well as extremely fast, extremely defensive (when cornered or restrained), and extremely alert and active (often in extremely hot weather). As snakes go, it has extremely good vision and extremely keen awareness and intelligence. Even an individual's coloration runs a light-to-dark extreme—North Carolina adults have coal-black heads and anterior bodies, grading to tan or beige toward their tails, with predominantly whitish or cream-colored bellies.

The Coachwhip, as a species, has an extensive overall distribution, including most of the southern U.S. and Mexico. The seven recognized races or subspecies exhibit extreme color and pattern variation and occur in an extremely wide range of habitats. The nominate subspecies, *M. f. flagellum*—the Eastern Coachwhip—reaches the extreme northeastern edge of its range in southeastern North Carolina, where it is a habitat specialist, inhabiting sand ridges, higher pine flatwoods, beach dunes, and other often extremely hot, xeric, open, sandy habitats.

Throughout the Southeast, the Coachwhip has suffered severe habitat loss and population declines along with other components of the decimated Longleaf Pine ecosystem. The North Carolina Natural Heritage Program lists it as “Significantly Rare.” The Sandhills region, especially Fort Bragg and the Sandhills Game Lands, provide some of the best remaining Coachwhip habitat in North Carolina.

The Coachwhip's common name is derived from the pattern of scales on its tail and posterior body—the pale scales with dark borders result in the tail very much resembling a braided whip. The scientific name essentially means “whipsnake with a whip.” In ever-amusing rural folklore, the Coachwhip was supposed to wrap around its victims and thrash them with its tail. In one version I heard, the “Whipcord Snake” was even capable of killing a person by running its tail through the unfortunate's nose and into the brain. In reality, of course, a Coachwhip's tail is completely harmless. Like several other snake species, a frightened or angry Coachwhip will rapidly vibrate its tail—this may serve to frighten some predators or divert their attention long enough for the snake to escape. And escape is just what any coachwhip will do, given half a chance. Approached in the open, it will disappear remarkably quickly, zipping down some nearby hole, melting into vegetation, or even ascending a tree. Cornered or restrained, however, a Coachwhip offers a spirited defense, launching wild lunges at its assailant. Its small, sharp, numerous teeth can cause only superficial scratches.

Coachwhips are closely related to the much more abundant, adaptable, and widespread Black Racer, *Coluber constrictor*. They were once included in the genus *Coluber* and some authorities now advocate returning



them to that group, based on genetic similarities. Fans of country comedian Jerry Clower may recall his “Coon Huntin’ Story,” in which he referred to a Lynx as a “souped-up wildcat.” A Coachwhip might similarly be described as a “souped-up racer.”

Coachwhips are strictly diurnal. They are mobile, active predators, often foraging with their heads held well off the ground. Like all snakes, they rely heavily on chemical cues to find prey, but unlike most, they may also hunt prey visually. Their diet includes lizards, snakes, birds and their eggs, small mammals, and some large arthropods. I once found a road-kill that eaten two hatchling Eastern Box Turtles. But their most common prey item is the Six-lined Racerunner, *Cnemidophorus sexlineatus* [= *Aspidoscelis sexlineata*]—another denizen of the xeric sand country. Racerrunners are even faster than Coachwhips, so the snakes probably hunt them by ambush rather than active chase. Even very large Coachwhips seem to feed



heavily on these speedy lizards, to the point that it might be safe to say that they specialize in eating them. Coachwhips are neither venomous nor constrictors; they either swallow their prey alive, chew it and drag it about until it is weakened or dead, or press it against the substrate with a loop of their body until it can be swallowed.

Though capable of moving fast and far, and covering great distances, Coachwhips—at least those few that I’ve radio-tracked in our Sandhills—are home bodys with well-defined territories. Their home ranges may encompass 100 acres or more, and be as much as a mile across, but the snakes know exactly where they are, often



returning repeatedly to favorite spots, and frequently exhibiting hibernaculum fidelity (i.e., using the same stump hole or other subterranean refugium to overwinter in consecutive years).

Like many other snake species, Coachwhips like to hide under tin, boards, or other large sheltering objects. This provides protection from predators but

still allows them to be on the surface. They may also find prey beneath these refugia, and tin or other sheet metal warmed by the sun can provide them with unique thermoregulatory opportunities.

One of the easiest ways to see a coachwhip up close is to find one under tin, plywood, or other cover on a cool or overcast day, or early in the morning. Occasionally a Coachwhip, caught and handled under cool conditions, will exhibit a sort of thanatosis, or death-feigning, going limp in its captor’s hands.

Coachwhips probably mate mostly in spring, but some mating may also occur in the fall. Females deposit a clutch of 4 to 16 white, leathery-shelled eggs, usually in June or July. The egg surfaces are covered with small granules, as if they had been salted; this is also true of Black Racer eggs—in North Carolina, reptile eggs with small, scattered granules on the surface can be readily identified as belonging to one of these two species. Natural nests have not been reported for Coachwhips in North Carolina; all our information on clutch sizes has come from females caught before their eggs were laid. Most nests hatch in September. Hatchlings are about 16-17



inches long and patterned quite differently from adults, with wavy dorsal crosslines and ornate white markings on their heads.

Much remains to be learned about the natural history of the Coachwhip in North Carolina. Don't expect to make friends with one, but maybe you'll be lucky enough to encounter one of these spectacular serpents someday while out walking on a sand ridge. Perhaps you'll even have the opportunity to look into its fire-ringed eyes before it turns its whip-tail and heads for the next county. To do so is, well, an extreme experience.

-- Jeff Beane



Photos by Jeff Beane



Of This and That

Don't Forget... To check the SNHS web site (www.sandhillsnature.org) for information on last-minute field trips and/or changes in already scheduled ones. There you'll find a link to the Sandhills Natural History Society facebook page which also has all the latest information.

Interesting Sightings:

Many North Carolina birders journeyed to the Sandhills Game Lands in northeastern Scotland County in late April and early May to see and hear a Cassin's Sparrow—the first one known from the state. The bird hung out in a brushy old field along Slate Road for a couple of weeks. A Fork-tailed Flycatcher was also seen in the same area.

Dues – Dues are \$5.00 per person, per year. The dues year is from January 1 through December 31. Please mail your check for \$5.00, payable to “Sandhills Natural History Society,” to Carol Bowman, Treasurer, at:

Sandhills Natural History Society
P.O. Box 1472
Southern Pines, NC 28388-1472

Please include your address, telephone number, and e-mail address with your payment.

TEES AND LANDS' END CAPS – SNHS merchandise can be purchased at our monthly meetings. Contact David Kilpatrick at 910-295-5224 or at snhslogo@mac.com if you have any questions.

- \$10 T-shirts
- \$17 Baseball Caps (with embroidered logo)
- \$14 Baseball Caps (with plain logo)
- \$12 Mugs
- \$ 3 Stickers

Recycle your nature, birding, or gardening magazines at each monthly meeting. There will be a table where you can drop off or pick up magazines of interest to our group.

SNHS Board of Directors 2011:

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	Carol Bowman	cbowman6@nc.rr.com
	Jeff Beane	jeff.beane@ncdenr.gov
Merchandise	David Kilpatrick	snhslogo@mac.com



C/o Weymouth Woods Nature Preserve
1024 N. Fort Bragg Road
Southern Pines, NC 28387

ATTENTION!!!

If you have e-mail and are experiencing trouble receiving all the newsletters and announcements via e-mail, please contact Chris Norkus immediately. info@sandhillsnature.org

If you do not have e-mail, please read this:

Our field trips often have schedule changes and we send out e-mail updates to the membership. We suggest you ask a friend who receives these emails to keep you informed. You can also periodically call the field trip leader to get the latest updates. You can also check out the SNHS web site at www.sandhillsnature.org.