

FOREWORD

The land that we call the Low Country was celebrated in the first detailed, illustrated account ever published on birds of the Americas. An Englishman named Mark Catesby had lived for a time in Charleston, South Carolina, and had traveled throughout the coastal areas of Georgia, the Carolinas, and nearby states, and had fallen in love with the birdlife there. His multi-volume *Natural History*, featuring his own written descriptions and hand-colored illustrations, started off with five sections treating 100 different kinds of birds. The first of these was published in 1729. Nearly half a century before the United States became a nation, nearly a century before the appearance of John James Audubon's *Birds of America*, scholars in Europe were fascinated by Catesby's depictions of Low Country birds.

The birdlife of this region has been inspiring fascination ever since. I have been fortunate enough to visit the Low Country many times; after every visit, I have come away simply astonished by the sheer numbers and variety of birds.

On the beaches and tidal flats around the innumerable islands and estuaries, swarms of sandpipers and plovers from the Arctic may stand next to flocks of terns from the Caribbean. In the groves of graceful live oaks, in the cypress stands draped with Spanish moss, flocks of colorful songbirds abound at all seasons. In the magnificent stretches of salt marshes – reduced to scraps elsewhere on the Atlantic Coast, but still thriving here – flocks of herons, egrets, ibises, and other wading birds cavort in the shallows. This is a wonderland of birds. The 200-mile stretch of coastline centered on Savannah, Georgia, should be recognized as one of the great birding destinations of North America. But some who are blessed to live in the area may almost take the local abundance of birds for granted.

One who definitely does not take the birds for granted is Diana Churchill. After growing up in Savannah, she lived and traveled in other states for twenty-five years before moving home to Georgia in 1999. Since 2001, she has been writing about birds for the *Savannah Morning News*, illustrating her column with her own photographs, and attracting legions of followers to take note of the natural world.

Now the finest of those columns have formed the basis for this beautiful book, which leads us season by season through the avian delights of this region. Diana Churchill's writing – graceful and warm and inviting, like the land that it celebrates – provides the perfect invitation for all of us to discover anew the amazing and beautiful birdlife of the Low Country.

Kenn Kaufman

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Carolina Wren nest in wreath

a parent, or a friend. Curiosity grows. How long until the eggs hatch? When will they *fledge* – leave the nest?

Different species of birds play the nesting game differently. Some – like cardinals, brown thrashers, and mockingbirds – build nests in shrubbery,



Blue-gray Gnatcatchers at their nest

trees or dense underbrush. Hummingbirds and blue-gray gnatcatchers build a tiny nest that they cover with moss and lichens until it looks like another bump on the branch. Others species – such as woodpeckers, chickadees, titmice, nuthatches, and bluebirds – prefer to build their nests in a tree cavity. These cavity nesters will also use nest boxes. Put up a box and you're a "bird-lord," with all the attendant responsibilities, joys, and frustrations – at risk for a case of the Blues.

To keep the blues at bay, we might take a lesson from the Buddhists. Attachment, they say, generates suffering. To avoid suffering, practice non-attachment. In other words, put up your box and take what you get.

I know. We all have our favorites. "But I really wanted bluebirds," you cry when the titmice move in. Guess it's time to put up another box.

Really, the joys usually win out in the end. In Hinesville, the bluebirds

finally returned to nest in the disputed box. Brown-headed nuthatches, while not as showy as bluebirds, make feisty and entertaining tenants. The thin, high-pitched squeaks from my relocated box tell me the first batch of chickadees has arrived. Bluebirds, after all, nest three or four times in a season so they may get that perfect box the next time around.

"Be gone," I say. "I just ain't got time for those Nesting Box Blues!"



Brown-headed Nuthatch inspects post

CHEERIO THE VIREOS

While hummingbirds and painted buntings get most of the spring publicity, I'd like to put in a plug for an often-overlooked bird family – the vireos. The name comes from the Latin *vireo*, "to be green," and refers to an assortment of small songbirds found only in the Western hemisphere.

Vireos are plain birds with colorful names. They generally conceal themselves within dense foliage, moving deliberately and methodically among the leaves and branches in search of caterpillars, moths, beetles, stink bugs, wasps, bees, and other assorted insects.

While fourteen species of vireo are found in North America, only four species are common in the Low Country. Each has a name that starts with a color – blue-headed, white-eyed, yellow-throated, and red-eyed. As vireos are by nature somewhat secretive, finding one usually takes active looking or listening.

As I walked out to the mailbox one morning in early April, I heard a slightly whiny ascending "here I am," followed

by the down-slurred query, "where are you?"

"Ah-hah," I thought. "The blue-headed vireo has come to call." I scanned the tree canopy for small movements, finally resorting to dialing up the song on my iPod. "Here I am, where are you?" called my recorded vireo. Immediately, a small shape flew towards me, landing on a nearby branch and cocking his head to the side in the quizzical fashion characteristic of



White-eyed Vireo



Eastern Bluebird, female

wriggle tantalizingly, a protein packed treat for bluebirds, wrens, warblers, and other insect eaters. Mealworms can be a lifesaver for Mom and Pop Bluebird when there are four hungry mouths to feed.

Although volumes have been written about every aspect of feeding and housing bluebirds, there are two points I would like to emphasize. If at all possible, pole mount your bluebird box and install some type of baffle on the pole to keep raccoons and snakes from feasting on your bluebird family. Second, be extremely careful about pesticide use while the bluebirds are feeding babies. Mole crickets, while a scourge for homeowners, are a tasty treat for baby bluebirds. Companies like “Gardens Alive” (www.gardensalive.com) offer alternative solutions for getting rid of troublesome pests.

To get more detailed answers to

your bluebird questions, visit the web site of the North American Bluebird Society (www.nabluebirdsociety.org) or visit your local bird feeding store.

Cheer up! Be happy! Particularly if you've got the “blues” – birds, that is!



Eastern Bluebird nestlings

FISH HAWKS MAKE GOOD NEIGHBORS

Every time I leave my neighborhood, I inspect “the tree.” This is a marvelous, weathered dead trunk, strategically placed behind a small pond. The best part about it is that you never know what you might find there at any given time. One day it may host a flock of white ibis, resting until the tide gets low enough for them to probe for fiddlers in the marsh.

Another day, the belted kingfisher might be perched there to scan for fish. Quite often, “the tree” is the dining spot of choice for the local osprey.

No matter how often I see this striking raptor, I always have to stop for another look. With its dark brown

or bird, but only if there were a shortage of fish.

Ospreys are so skilled at catching fish that people once believed that they



Osprey splash

cast a spell on the fish, or that they released an oily substance from their bodies that would lure the fish to the surface. Most likely, their success is due to the fact that they are specialists, well equipped with technique as well as tools.

Patrolling 30 to 100 feet above the water, the ospreys scan for fish swimming near the surface. They have the ability to hover in place, like helicopters, kingfishers, and kestrels. When a fish is spotted, an osprey half closes its wings, stretches its feet forward with



Osprey on its nest

back, white under parts, hooked beak, and sporty brown eye stripe, the “fish hawk” is unmistakable. All around the world, where there is an ocean, a lake, or a river, there will most likely be an osprey. In flight, their long narrow wings, kinked at the “wrist,” are distinctive. Ospreys patrol the waterways in search of their favorite dish – fish, fish and more fish. A desperate osprey might resort to eating a small mammal



Osprey on piling with its catch

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*This book is dedicated to my grandmother,
Estelle Erwin Kandel, who loved reading and words
and passed that love on to all her children and grandchildren,
and to my parents,
Bob and Phillippa Paddison –
educators “par excellence” whose lifetime of love and caring
has helped this book take flight.*