

BIRD NOTES by Rick Pyeritz

*Some keep the Sabbath going to Church –
I keep it, staying at Home –
With a Bobolink for a Chorister –
And an Orchard, for a Dome –*

*Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice –
I, just wear my Wings –
And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,
Our little Sexton – sings.*

*God preaches, a noted Clergyman –
And the sermon is never long.
So instead of getting to Heaven, at last –
I'm going, all along.*

Emily Dickinson



It began with a conversation over breakfast at the Fryemont Inn in Bryson City one spring morning in 1984. Fred Alsop, Professor of Biology at East Tennessee State University and an expert on Southern Appalachian birds, George Ellison, naturalist and author of numerous books on the natural history of these mountains, and I, would organize an annual outing to see as many birds as we could during a 36-hour period at the end of April or the beginning of May. The Great Smoky Mountain Birding Expedition would take us through different elevations and habitats, from the town of Bryson City over to Cherokee, taking the Blue Ridge Parkway into the Great Smoky Mountains National Park (GSMNP) up to Heintooga. From there, we would travel to lower elevations to bird areas

along the Tuckasegee River. The next day we would bird the Nantahala Gorge up to the Tallulah Bog in Graham County. Our goal was to tally 100 species before noon on the last day. In order to get the 100 species, we found that we would have to identify 90 usual species, plus 10 others we do not routinely see. One banner year, our group tallied 116 species; another year, plagued by wind and rain, we only managed to get 71 species.

This year we celebrated our 35th annual expedition. The promised inclement weather materialized in the afternoon which cut the birding short; however, the rain held off the next morning allowing us to catch up a bit. We finished with 88 species, including two new birds for the outing, a Nashville Warbler and a Willett.

One bird we make a special effort to find in the tall grassy fields along the Tuckasegee River is the Bobolink. Only a few years has found our final tally sheet empty of a check mark for a Bobolink.



Arthur Stupka, naturalist/biologist for the GSMNP from 1935 to 1964 and author of the book Notes on the Birds of GSMNP, stated that the Bobolink was not common in the park in the spring and rare in the fall. Our experience has been that fairly large flocks of Bobolinks can be observed in the spring on the river-bottom land along the Tuckasegee River near Bryson City. This used to be the site of the ancient Cherokee village called Kituwha. Until a few years ago, this area used to be a dairy farm known as Ferguson Fields. It is now owned by the Cherokee tribe.

We are usually alerted to the presence of Bobolinks in the tall grass fields by their unique bubbly song which, according to some, bears a striking resemblance to the Star Wars character, R2D2. Audubon, not having been exposed to George Lucas's films, described their song as follows....

“.....their song, which is extremely interesting, and emitted with a volubility bordering on the burlesque, heard from a whole party at the same time; when, as each individual is, of course, possessed of the same musical powers as his neighbors, it becomes amusing to listen to thirty or forty of them beginning one after another, as if ordered to follow in quick succession, after the first notes are given by a leader, and producing such a medley as it is impossible to describe, although it is extremely pleasant to hear it.”

Audubon knew the Bobolink by the name Wandering Rice-bird; a reference to one of its favored foods during fall migration. The Bobolink is known to make a transoceanic flight of 3500 km from South America to North America in the spring; an amazing accomplishment for a songbird weighing only 30 grams. The taxonomic nomenclature of the Bobolink is explained below:

Order: Passeriformes Perching birds

Family: Icteridae Orioles, Grackles, Cowbirds

Genus: Dolichonyx (Greek for “long-clawed”)

Species: Oryzivorusa (Latin for “rice-eater”)

Common Name: Bobolink--- formerly *bobolincon* is onomatopoeic in origin and was popularized in a poem by William Cullen Bryant *Robert O'Lincoln*. The first stanza is below—

Merrily swinging on brier and weed,
Near to the nest of his little dame,
Over the mountain-side or mead
Robert of Lincoln is telling his name.
Bob-o'-link, bob-o'-link,
Spink, spank, spink,
Snug and safe is this nest of ours,
Hidden among the summer flowers.
Chee, chee, chee.

Questions and/or comments email me at eapyeritz@gmail.com