



BIRD WATCHERS'

Roundtable

Birding Around Cherokee, N.C.

H. DOUGLAS PRATT

Cherokee, N.C., in the heart of the Qualla Indian Reservation, is the center of one of the best birding areas in western North Carolina. From this point one can reach the best spots for birds in the southeastern half of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and along the southern end of the Blue Ridge Parkway. These two units of the National Park System are sanctuaries for all wildlife and provide a spectacular altitudinal cross-section of eastern North America within relatively short distances.

One of the best places to observe birds of low and middle altitudes is the Oconaluftee area, also known as the Floyd-Enloe Bottoms. This area can be reached by driving into the park from Cherokee on Highway 441 (Newfound Gap Road). Just inside the park boundary is a large hayfield where in early summer one can expect Eastern Meadowlarks, Red-winged Blackbirds, Eastern Bluebirds, Barn Swallows, and Common Crows. Inspection of the wooded edges of the fields will reveal a large variety of small songbirds. These will include such warblers as the Black-and-white, Parula, Yellow, Yellow-throated, and Ovenbird. The visitor should stop at the Pioneer Museum on the right for a copy of the park check-list of birds and a map of the area.

Continuing into the park from the museum, turn right at the first opportunity. This will take you into the Park Service Quarters area. Many of the same species mentioned earlier will be here, plus some others. You will cross the Oconaluftee River where Belted Kingfishers are commonly seen. Also to be looked for are Turkey Vulture, Eastern Wood Pewee, Song Sparrow, Yellow-throated and Red-eyed Vireos, Scarlet Tanager, American Goldfinch, and Cedar Waxwing.

The Newfound Gap Road continues across the park to the Tennessee side. The state line runs along the ridge that includes two high altitude areas of interest to birders. Take the Clingman's Dome Road, turning left off the Newfound Gap Road. This 9-mile drive takes one to the parking area from which it is possible to climb to the lookout tower on top of the mountain. This trail, however, is not recommended for birding in the summer because it is overrun with great flocks of *Homo sapiens*. However, some of the side trails are profitable, especially early in the morning before the crowds arrive. These include a

loop trail that begins at the parking area and ties in with the Appalachian Trail along the crest of Clingman's Dome. Here one may expect to find Winter Wrens, Red-breasted Nuthatches, Black-capped Chickadees, Chestnut-sided Warblers, Canada Warblers, Black-burnian Warblers, Golden-crowned Kinglets, and sometimes Red Crossbills and Olive-sided Flycatchers.

Returning to the main highway, the birder will be only a short distance from Newfound Gap. At the Gap is another parking area from which one may hike on portions of the Appalachian Trail. The species mentioned for Clingman's Dome will also be found here. Of course, there are many lesser areas along these roads where one may stop and bird watch. Always keep in mind, however, that there are thousands of other drivers on the highway any day during the summer and pull off the road for safety. Actually, the best places for birds are the edges around overlooks anyway.

Another area of interest close to Cherokee is the short section of Big Cove Road that passes through the park. It traverses a variety of habitats close to Raven Fork, a beautiful clear stream. To reach the road, follow the brown and yellow sign that reads "Big Cove Road Campgrounds," located at the park boundary on US 441. Along Big Cove Road in the weedy and brushy fields may be found the following species: Broad-winged Hawk, Yellow-breasted Chat, Yellowthroat, Cardinal, Wood Thrush, Great Crested Flycatcher, and Golden-winged Warbler. One of the best spots for the Golden-wing is the area where the Blue Ridge Parkway crosses over Big Cove Road.

Perhaps the best single drive available for birders in this area begins at the southern terminus of the Blue Ridge Parkway. From here one can drive up the parkway to the Heintooga Road. It is a left turn marked by a sign about 8 miles above the starting point.

Heintooga Road goes up Balsam Mountain to a campground and picnic area. Birders should not hurry through this area. Any of the overlooks will prove rewarding, especially early in the morning. At lower altitudes, you will see the same species mentioned for Oconaluftee, but as the road ascends, new species will become noticeable. At the Ballhoo Scar Overlook, one should listen for the dry buzzing song of the Worm-eating Warbler. At the Jenkins Ridge Overlook you will find Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, Scarlet Tanagers, Red-tailed Hawks, and Least Flycatchers. Anywhere above 3,000 feet in elevation, juncos will be common, and at almost all elevations the song of the Chestnut-sided Warbler will be heard constantly through July.

An excellent stop on the Heintooga Road is Black Camp Gap, where you will find Field Sparrows, Least Flycatchers, Solitary Vireos, towhees, and Ruby-throated Hummingbirds. Anywhere along this road is a good spot for the Common Raven. At Heintooga, you should look for the same species as those mentioned for Clingman's Dome.

To return to Cherokee from Heintooga, one may either retrace his path down the parkway or take the Round Bottom Road. This road is gravel, built on the bed of an old logging railroad. It is usually in excellent condition. It is a fine forest drive and many species not easily seen elsewhere will usually turn up along the way. These include Cooper's Hawk, Barred Owl, and Ruffed Grouse. The Round Bottom Road is one-way down, so it is impossible to follow it without going to Heintooga.

Anyone planning to visit the Cherokee area or the Smoky Mountains in general should be aware of the great altitudinal variation in the bird life. Birds on top of Clingman's Dome or Balsam Mountain will be like those of southern Canada, while those in the valleys will more nearly resemble those of piedmont North Carolina. Another thing to keep in mind is that birds are more likely to be seen in edges such as around overlooks than in dense virgin forests. The spectacular forests of the Smokies often give the impression of being devoid of birds, which, of course, is not the case at all. The Cherokee area is well worth a visit, and may be just the place for some Southerners to add northern birds to their life lists, and vice versa.

Museum of Zoology, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, La. 70803