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The Chattanooga Chat

CHATTANOOGA CHAPTER OF THE TENNESSEE ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY



Pine Warbler

Photo by David Goldsmith

JANUARY MEETING

January 8, 2026, 7:00-8:30pm

Ascension Lutheran Church

720 S. Germantown Road

Our speaker is **Austin Young**, Tennessee River Gorge Trust
"How Have Migrant Birds Responded to 17 Years of Change?"

How are the more than 100 migratory bird species responding to the changes in our riparian woodlands? Come to learn the surprising answers to this and other subjects of Austin's research.

All are welcome!

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

January 1, 2026

Happy New Year, everyone! I want to wish you all the best in 2026 and, again, thank you for your continued membership in CTOS.

Speaking of membership, it's that time again! For those of you joining after July 2025, no worries. You're covered. For the rest of us, let's go ahead and register our membership. You can do so easily on our website through PayPal, or you can send a check to our treasurer David Stone, P.O. Box 330, Ooltewah, TN 37363, or pay at our next meeting on the 8th. A portion of your dues, \$20, goes to the state organization to support scholarships, TOS publications (The Tennessee Warbler newsletter and The Migrant quarterly journal), and our tech fees. Of course, you will continue also to receive our chapter newsletter, The Chattanooga Chat.

As a reminder, here are our fees for 2026: Student (\$15), Individual (\$30), Family (\$35), Sustaining (\$40), Life (\$460, plus yearly \$10 supplement).

As always, I hope you'll join us on our many field trips and attend our monthly meetings, the second Thursday of each month.

Let's all together continue our important leadership in the Chattanooga birding community. We provide an invaluable service not only to our fellow Chattanoogans but also to the birds that enrich our lives every day.

Happy Birding!
OJ Morgan



ABOUT AUSTIN YOUNG, JANUARY'S SPEAKER

We live in a world subject to change—both naturally and, in recent history, due to human activity. In the riparian woodlands of the Intermountain West in the USA, changes in agricultural water use have been a driving force behind the degradation of riparian woodland ecosystems. Despite this, more than 100 migratory bird species rely on the mosaic of riparian woodlands to navigate the cold desert (sagebrush steppe) landscape during migration.

How are migrating birds responding to changes in the extent and quality of riparian woodlands? That is one of the many questions Austin Young and his research partners aimed to answer during their 2022–2024 study. They replicated mist netting and point count surveys originally conducted in the mid-2000s to assess bird use at a premier migratory bird hotspot in eastern Idaho after a 17-year interval. Their findings included a mix of expected and surprising results, which Austin will share at the January 8th CTOS meeting.

Austin Young is a native Idahoan who has been an avid birder since he was about three years old. He has lived in Idaho, Oregon, and Kansas, and currently resides in eastern Tennessee. Austin has worked in the field of conservation since high school, both as a self-employed professional and through positions with universities, state agencies, nonprofits, and private companies. He studied ecology and conservation biology as an undergraduate at Idaho State University (ISU), where he also earned a Master's degree in Biology in 2024. He currently serves as the Research and Stewardship Coordinator at the Tennessee River Gorge Trust, a local nonprofit based in Chattanooga.



Chipping Sparrow Photo by David Goldsmith

We are also saddened by the passing of one of our longtime members, Francis Clay Sneker. In addition to his many years of involvement with the club, Clay faithfully served as pastor of our meeting place, Ascension Lutheran Church, from 1981 to 2006. His presence and contributions will be deeply missed.

HOW BIRDING TOOK FLIGHT

by Angela Beeg, 2006 graduate of Southern University.

This article was published in the Southern.edu magazine, Spring 2017
and submitted by Kent Pennington

The thrill of the hunt, the joy of discovery, and the beauty of God's nature blend together in the popular pastime of birdwatching. One of the fastest-growing hobbies in North America, birding wouldn't be what it is today without the influence of several Southern alumni.

Back in the 1960's, students Jim Tucker, '62, Nat Halverson, '63, and Benton Basham, '66, worked alongside each other in the broom factory on Southern's campus. They were paid by the piece, not by the hour, and over time they developed a friendly rivalry to see who could be the most productive. Then one day something happened that gave their competitive spirit a new focus. A flock of birds landed outside the window and Basham eyed them through his binoculars.

"See those birds?" he murmured thoughtfully. "What are they?"

"I don't know," Halverson shrugged. "Some kind of sparrow, I guess."

"Just look!" Basham pushed the binoculars into his hands.

Halverson peered through them, first reluctantly, then with increasing interest. The birds were a beautiful gradient of color, ranging from reddish brown at the head to a purplish blue with a bright yellow band at the tail.

"They were the most remarkably dressed birds I had ever seen," Halverson remembers 40 years later. "Those Cedar Waxwings were my first sighting. After that, I was hooked."

From then on, breaks at the broom factory became birding bonanzas. The three students would dash off to the woods along the nearby creek to see who could spot the most birds before their agreed-upon time was up. As the son of two birdwatchers, Tucker's first childhood memory was watching a White-breasted Nuthatch on a birdfeeder. He was thrilled to find two new friends who shared his interest. The three friends' love of the game pushed them to improve their skills, and soon they were good enough to recognize the birds around them just by their calls.

Tucker, Basham, and Halverson became deeply involved with the Chattanooga Chapter of the Tennessee Ornithological Society, making friends from all over the area. Several times a year, the members would divide the county into various sections, split off into groups and birdwatch all day. Then in the evening they would regroup for what they called "the countdown" to list the birds they had observed and, for fun, determine who had spotted the most.

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After the three friends graduated from Southern, they went their separate ways. Basham pursued further education and became a nurse anesthetist. Halverson and Tucker went on to teach in the Seventh-Day Adventist school system. But there was one thing they never left behind: their insatiable, contagious love of birdwatching.

The broom factory was not just a job for Halverson; it was also where he met his wife, Margaret (Richardson) Halverson, '70. In Margaret, he found not only an amazing life partner but also a fellow bird lover. She assisted her husband as he became deeply involved in many scientific bird-banding research projects that involved catching birds, marking them with an identifying band around the leg, and then releasing them to be tracked in the future. The Halversons spent many years teaching at Standifer Gap Seventh-Day Adventist school and integrated their avian knowledge into the curriculum there. They gave their students the opportunity to have tactile involvement with the bird banding, an experience that resonated with many, including Carl Swafford, '75, now dean of Graduate Studies at Southern, who never thought he would be interested in birds.

“I loved bird banding because I could hold the bird in my hand,” Swafford remembers. “We tagged birds and tracked their travels throughout the seasons. Many of them were re-trapped in states across the Northeast. One bird, a Chimney Swift, was trapped in Peru! Now that’s exciting to a 13 year-old boy who loved nature.”

Chris Haney, '81, was another Standifer Gap student deeply influenced by the Halversons. In fact, their influence is one reason Haney pursued a career involving birds. During the 2010 Deepwater Horizon Disaster, Haney led a survey to document the impact of the spilled oil on marine birds. Currently he is the senior advisor of a survey tracking the geography and seasonality of marine birds across the Gulf of Mexico for the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management for the Department of the Interior.

“Margaret was so instrumental in combining high expectations with praise,” Haney remembers. “She and Nat taught all of us to apply ourselves to the maximum in everything we did.”

Although Basham was a nurse anesthetist by day, the rest of the time he was 100% birdwatcher. Even after graduation, Basham and Tucker remained close, spotting birds together when they could and collaborating on what birders call a “Big Day.” In a Big Day, one attempts to see as many bird species as possible within a 24-hour period.

Basham, Tucker, and the three other members of their team attempted one Big Day so elaborate that it was profiled by *Sports Illustrated Magazine* in 1979. The day started at 2am in east Texas at the marshes of the Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge. Next they went to the local hardwood and pine forest, and then to Galveston. From there they were whisked off to Rockport by Learjet, where they watched the ducks of Copano Bay, the shorebirds of Mustang Island, and Oso Bay.

After that they flew to the Mexican border to see the birds of the Rio Grande Valley. Next they went to the Huachuca Mountains in Arizona before their grand finale in San Diego and Mount Palomar. Their goal was to beat the U.S. record of 231 sightings and perhaps the world record of 288; unfortunately, bad luck left them at 183. Still, they had a thrilling and memorable time trying.

Basham's ambitions didn't end there. In 1998, he set out to break the "Big Year" record. With 711 sightings that year, he became the No. 1 birder in North America. Eventually, with the help of rare-bird Internet blog updates, his record was surpassed. Still, at the time and with the resources Basham had, his achievement was incredible. Even now he remains a hero of the birding community.

"Dad flew all over the United States and probably went to Gamble, Alaska six to eight times that year alone," remembers Jeff Basham, '83, his son. "It could be frustrating; you could go all the way out there just to have the bird fly away two minutes before you arrived. I loved having a dad who was a birder. All through my childhood, he would take me out of school once or twice a week. Then we would hop on a plane to go find a bird."

The Birth of the American Birding Association

Tucker always loved fellowshipping with other bird lovers. For him, shared interests easily overcame age barriers. While at Southern, he was the youngest member of the Chattanooga Chapter of the Ornithological Society and became president at age 21. When he moved to Florida to teach, he joined the Florida Audubon Society and became president of the Orange County chapter. There he continued doing counts with his new friends and also became deeply involved with the movement to save the forests, swamp, prairies, and lakes. The members of the Audubon Society had a wonderful time together but faced a recurring challenge; they could not figure out how to get the youth on board.

In 1968, Tucker moved to Texas to pursue his doctorate. He missed his buddies back East, so on a whim he put together a little newsletter chronicling the adventures of his birdwatching friends around the country. He cranked out 12 copies on a ditto machine and mailed them with a letter asking for feedback and suggestions. Not long afterwards, he was bowled over by the enthusiastic response he received- both in ideas and names to be added to the mailing list.

"I laughingly called it *BirdWatchers Digest, Volume 0, Number 0*," Tucker recalls. "One of the best suggestions I received was to change the newsletter's name to 'Birding.' A friend of mine had heard the term used in England, but it hadn't been used in the United States up to that point."

After its debut as the title of the next issue of the newsletter, the term "birding" rapidly entrenched itself in popular U.S. vernacular. *Birding* also laid the foundation for what would later become the American Birding Association (ABA). Its goals were to informally connect passionate birders, to communicate the latest bird identification, techniques, and to establish the rules for listing (a system for logging one's sightings). *(continued)*

Birding also included the top 10 lists of birders around the world, which inspired many younger birders to take up the sport and attempt to get their names on the prestigious list. It turned out that the secret all along for getting the younger generation involved was to harness that same friendly, competitive spirit that had initially motivated Tucker, Halverson, and Basham to get out in nature during their broom factory breaks.

Tucker became the ABA's executive director, and Basham helped with marketing as the membership director. Within a few years, they had hundreds of subscribers and held their first national conference. As of 2017, the ABA has more than 13,000 members.

"It really caused an explosion," Tucker says. "It put birding into the realm of fun for the nation. Not only did it bring people together in a friendly exchange, but it gave people a reason to want to save a swamp or other bird habitat. In 2011, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reported that the economic impact of birding in the United States is now more than \$100 billion annually. It's hard to believe that all of this started with our experiences at Southern and translated into this amazing movement."



Song Sparrow photo by David Goldsmith