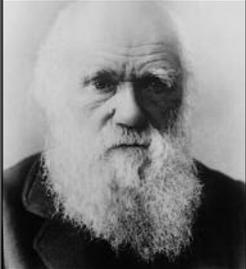




Otter Tracks

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**Happy 200th Birthday
Charles Darwin**
February 12th
1809–2009!

OCAS Mission:

To protect birds, other wildlife and their habitats by encouraging a culture of conservation within Addison County.



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Great Backyard Bird Count



European Starling
Photo by Evelyn Samson

Do you have Pine Siskins at your feeders this winter? Evening Grosbeaks? You can share this information with other like-minded citizen scientists during the twelfth annual Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBH), which takes place during any or all of the four days of Friday through Monday, February 13–16.

Here's what you do. Count the highest total of each bird species in your yard for at least 15 minutes, in a local park, on vacation, or wherever you choose to do your counts. Taking the highest total avoids duplicate counting. Send in your totals on one or more days during the GBBC period to www.birdsource.org/gbbc. Use a separate checklist for each day. The checklist you fill out is very user-friendly. Or you can mail in the form enclosed in this Otter Tracks, again a new form for each day you count. Don't forget to make extra copies of the form before you enter your first day's data. Mail to GBBC, Audubon Science, 545 Almshouse Rd., Ivyland PA 18974 by Friday, February 20.

Last year, BirdSource, a partnership between National Audubon and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, received 85,000 GBBC checklists reporting 9.8 million birds of 635 species from throughout the United States and Canada, and they are expecting more this year. The information collected affords a

remarkable snapshot of the distribution of birds continent-wide. You can easily access the maps, top ten lists, or tallies in North America, New England, Vermont, Addison County, or elsewhere on the BirdSource website.

In 2007 Northern Cardinal, Mourning Dove, Dark-eyed Junco, Downy Woodpecker and American Goldfinch appeared on the most checklists continent-wide, but in Vermont the top five were Black-capped Chickadee, Blue Jay, Dark-eyed Junco, American Goldfinch and Downy Woodpecker. In Vermont Brattleboro had the highest number of species (35) while

Springfield and Moretown tied for the most checklists (26). Middlebury had 23 species and 9 checklists. Continent-wide, Snow Goose was most numerous, followed by Canada Goose, European Starling, American Robin, and Common Grackle.

A multi-year distribution map animation on the BirdSource website shows that every other year the Common Redpoll is common in Vermont. In 2008 it was among the most abundant species. Influxes of redpolls into Vermont in the last two weeks may alter this every other year distribution.

Red-bellied Woodpecker continued its movement northward Vermont in 2008, although this movement is largely still restricted to the Champlain Valley.

Participants who want to hone their bird identification skills can learn more from the GBBC web site, which offers identification tips and access photos, sounds, maps, and natural history information on more than 500 bird species. People can also submit photos to an online gallery showcasing a dazzling array of winter birds found during the GBBC. Competitions add another element of fun, including a photo contest, rankings for the most numerous birds, and the "checklist champ" total for towns, states, and provinces with the highest participation. 

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The “Free Market” May Be Unaffordable

Editorial by
Warren King

VIEWPOINT

U.S. politicians and those of other countries tout the benefits of the “free market.” In connection with this concept, reference is frequently made to “the invisible hand,” coined in 1776 by Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations*. According to this concept, an individual who acts in his own best interests in a free market promotes at the same time the best interests of the community as a whole, as if guided by a metaphorical invisible hand. But markets have not been free from government regulation and other constraints since at least the founding of this country, and they are getting less so every year.

A major problem with markets is that they do not reflect the full and true cost of products. Producing goods and services impacts the environment and the components of our global life support system. But those impacts are not generally included in the costs of the goods and services. Markets are good at capturing the obvious costs, those internal to the process of manufacturing, selling and transporting, but markets ignore external costs. In fact, businesses do their best to avoid external costs, largely because their competitors also fail to do so. Those costs are shared by all of us, whether we benefit from the goods and services or not.

But our global life support systems are weakening, and our current demands on natural resources would require 1.2 earths to supply, and are therefore unsustainable. It is time to rethink the “free market” by requiring that externalities be included in the cost of products. A good place to start would be with the practice of government subsidies.

According to Lester R. Brown, author of *Plan B 3.0: Mobilizing to Save Civilization*, taxpayers around the world currently pay \$700 billion in subsidies to encourage environmentally destructive activities like burning below-cost fossil fuels, overfishing the world’s fish stocks, overpumping aquifers, exhausting and poisoning soils, and clearing forests. Let’s get to work eliminating subsidies altogether, or, if we are wedded to them by long use, let’s at least use them to promote products that ease the strain on our planet. We can make markets free, but we can’t afford them if the price structure won’t allow us to include the cost of our impact on the global commons. 🌱

“Lungs of the Planet”: Bad News

The vast forests of Canada account for fully seven percent of the forested lands of the globe. Intuitively we think of them as the “lungs of the planet,” tying up vast amounts of carbon dioxide and releasing important (especially to us in Vermont downwind of the Canadian forests) quantities of oxygen into the atmosphere.

But times have changed. The combined impacts of a warming climate, forest fires, and insect outbreaks have caused Canada’s forests to cross the line and become a net producer of carbon dioxide. Werner Kurz, senior research scientist at the Canadian forest Service and leading expert on carbon cycles in forests, said “Since 1999, and especially in the last five years, the forests have shifted from being a carbon sink to a carbon source.”

Warmer temperatures, especially in

winter, have caused the northern forests to dry out somewhat. The mountain pine beetle, held in check by bitter cold winters, now survives in infestation numbers. More than 50,000 square miles of British Columbia conifers were killed in the last two years, and the beetle is poised to jump across into Alberta. Jim Snetsinger, British Columbia’s Chief Forester, said “Once those infested trees are killed by the pine beetle, they are no longer sequestering carbon—they are giving it off.” Drier forests and extensive areas of beetle-killed timber have encouraged ever larger forest fires, resulting in escalating amounts of carbon dioxide from the burned and denuded forests to enter the atmosphere. Eventually forest regeneration will take place, and vigorous young trees will tie up more carbon dioxide than the mature, slower-growing trees they replace, but

Canadian scientists predict that Canada’s forests won’t return to their status as a carbon sink until at least 2022.

In view of this situation the debate rages in Canada over how best to manage the remaining forests. Ending logging ensures that the carbon they contain is sequestered, but logging is a crucially important economic engine in Canada. Continued logging disturbs the soil and encourages the release of carbon dioxide from it. Replacing wood products with products made from plastic, metal or concrete, all of which are more energy-intensive than wood, will produce more carbon dioxide. So at least some logging is likely to continue in Canadian forests into the future, along with which will come, of course, increased carbon dioxide levels and warmer climates. 🌱

Middlebury Christmas Bird Count

by Jim Andrews

This year 40 field birders and 15 feeder watchers identified 21,147 birds on Sunday, December 14th within our 15-mile-diameter count circle centered on the Lemon Fair River in eastern Bridport. The Middlebury count is one of over 1,800 held throughout North and Central America.

This year our count was without open water. For the first time in its twenty-year history we did not locate a single Mallard, and for the second time in our history we did not locate a single gull. However, our field teams tallied some interesting terrestrial northern visitors, including 89 White-winged Crossbills. We had last seen this species in 1997, when we located eight of them. Also visiting from the north were a record 137 Pine Siskins. We see this species in about half of our counts. We found a record 1980 Snow Buntings, forced to road edges by deep snow. The Red-bellied Woodpecker continues to move north into the Champlain Valley. This year we located a record 21!

Five Bald Eagles were found along the Lake Champlain shore. Bald Eagles have become regular on our count and are on the increase in the state. We tallied eight Coopers Hawks and 63 Rough-legged Hawks, both count records. Three owling teams found a Snowy Owl, eight Great Horned Owls, five Eastern Screech Owls, three Barred Owls, two Short-eared Owls, and two tiny Saw Whet Owls.

Our species count totaled 64, about average for us. Our highest species tally was 80 in 2001, our lowest 56 in 1992. Over the last twenty years of the Middlebury count we have located 32 species every year, 47 species at least 80 percent of the time, and 64 species at least

50 percent of the time. Over the history of our count, we have found a combined total of 124 different species.

Thanks again to all our volunteers. Additional participants, particularly feeder watchers from within the count circle, are always welcome. Our count circle extends from the former Standard

Register west to New York State and from Snake Mountain south to Richville Dam. If you own a significant piece of undeveloped or partially developed land within this circle and would not mind a birding team walking through it once a year, please contact Otter Creek Audubon or Jim or Kris Andrews at 352-4734. 🐾



Blue-spotted salamander being moved from harm's way

Photo by Kiley Briggs

Salamander Escorts: Coming to a Site Near You!

For our sixth year of Salamander Escorts, we will work at two sites once again. In addition to our traditional amphibian crossing in West Salisbury, we offer again the opportunity to move salamanders and frogs off the road at an important spring migration site in northern New Haven. Spotted, blue-spotted, red-backed and four-toed salamanders as well as wood frogs, spring peepers and American toads should occur at both sites in roughly the same numbers.

These amphibians move on warm, wet nights in early spring from their upland overwintering sites to nearby vernal pools, where they mate and lay eggs. At each

location they must cross a road. Although neither location has much road traffic, usually a few vehicles each hour, our task is to move crossing amphibians out of harm's way. We keep track of numbers of each species for herpetologist Jim Andrews' research. In doing so we all gain insight into a remarkable but seldom observed annual migration and the amphibians that perform it.

The window for migration runs from Monday March 23 to Sunday April 26. Activity starts about 8:30 pm and can go to 1 am. Volunteers gather data for at least an hour, possibly two. Remember, you will be on a public road. Although traffic is light and slow, we cannot be responsible for drivers' attitudes or actions. You must be responsible for your safety and the safety of children you bring with you. Arrive or leave when you wish.

Please contact Warren or Barry King at 388-4082 or Kinglet@together.net to sign up for the 2009 volunteer list. Email is the preferred mode of contact, so please provide your email address. If you have no email, or if telephone is the only way you would receive a timely message, provide your telephone number. 🐾

OCAS Zach Osborne Fund

Each year OCAS provides funds to Addison County applicants for activities relating to environmental education. We are encouraging Addison County teachers to apply for funds to transport their students on environmental field trip and will use contributions to the Zach Osborne

Fund for this purpose. This fund honors the memory of a respected and committed OCAS board member and teacher at the Hannaford Career Center in Middlebury. We welcome contributions to the Zach Osborne Fund, OCAS, P.O. Box 938, Middlebury VT 05753. 🐾

The Rarest Breeding Birds of Addison County

The title of rarest breeding bird of Addison County goes to more than one species. Taking into account the records for the last decade of the Vermont Bird Record Committee, the 1976 – 1981 and 2003 – 2007 Vermont Breeding Bird Atlases (VtBBA1 and VtBBA2), and other reliable sources, the following species are at least in the running for the title.

Common Loon A pair nested on Lake Dunmore in 2007 and again in 2008, raising one chick each year. Although



Lake Dunmore Common Loon and piggybacker Photo by Mike Korkuc

Common Loons doubtless nested on Lake Dunmore in the past, the last record prior to 2007 is lost in the

mists of history. Lake Dunmore was considered too busy and developed for loon nesting until the loons disproved it in 2007. Elsewhere in Vermont loons are faring well. They were removed from the Vermont Endangered Species List in 2005. Sixty-one pairs nested statewide in 2008.

Sandhill Crane Although Sandhill Cranes have turned up from year to year in Vermont, this state is normally considered out of their breeding range. In 2000

a pair bred in Kennebec County, Maine, and a few birds persist in that outlier population. Otherwise the species nests west of New England. In 2005 a pair attempted to nest near Addison County's Bristol Pond. The chick did not survive. Again in 2006 they nested, and again the chick died.



The 2008 Bristol Pond Sandhill Crane family Photo by Louise Brynn

In 2007 the chick survived, the first successful nesting in Vermont. In 2008 the pair successfully raised two chicks to

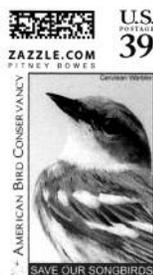
fledging. Many in the Bristol Pond area saw these conspicuous birds. A second pair apparently nested near Kellogg Bay in Ferrisburgh in 2008 and successfully raised one young.

American Wigeon This species normally occurs west of Vermont. A pair bred at Goodrich Corners in Addison in 2008. VtBBA1 notes a 1962 record of breeding at the Dead Creek Wildlife Management Area.

American Coot Rare in Vermont in migration, this species is even rarer as a breeder. VtBBA2 lists one probable nesting on Dead Creek. This author saw a coot with an unfledged young in the Little Otter Creek marshes in the late 1990s and a territorial pair in the same place in 2002.

Long-eared Owl This scarce, shy owl bred in Waltham in 1978 according to VtBBA1. VtBBA2 records probable breeding on Snake Mountain and in Ferrisburgh between 2003 and 2007. This species probably nests more frequently in Addison County than the records indicate, but such events usually go undetected.

Sedge Wren Of irregular occurrence in wet meadows, this species was confirmed breeding in Middlebury and at Dead Creek and probably breeding at two other Addison County sites by contributors to VtBBA2.



Special issue U.S. postage stamp featuring Cerulean Warbler

Cerulean Warbler This attractive, declining warbler nested on Snake Mountain in 2008, a first for Addison County. It has nested in Sandbar State Park and Wildlife Management Area in Chittenden County for a number of years and a possible nesting north on the Canadian border. No other nesting is known in Vermont.

Prairie Warbler Contributors to VtBBA2 recorded one pair probably breeding at the southern end of Addison County, near the Rutland County center of abundance of this rare species in Vermont. The species was restricted entirely to the Connecticut River valley during VtBBA1, and was largely absent from there during VtBBA2.

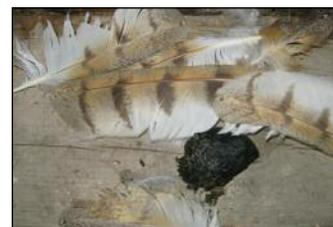
Clay-colored Sparrow This species nested in Cornwall in 2004. Although several individuals were recorded in Vermont over the last few years, including two banded at Dead Creek Wildlife Management Area, no other breeding records exist for Addison County.



Clay-colored Sparrow at Dead Creek Wildlife Management Area Photo by Ryan Kayhart

And a tantalizing last species:

Barn Owl This species has always been rare in Vermont. A handful of early records led to confirmed breeding of four pairs in Vermont during field work for VtBBA1. Two of the four pairs were from Addison County. It has been a number of years since



Barn Owl feathers and pellet from a suspected breeding site in an Addison County barn. Photo by Rodney Olsen

Barn Owls were reported in Vermont. VtBBA2 documented no nesting. In 2008 copious fresh Barn

Owl pellets and feathers were found in an Addison County barn, enough evidence to suggest that breeding had taken place, although not confirmed by direct observations. 🐾



OCAS Calendar of Events

February – April 2009



FRI-MON, FEBRUARY 13-16 Great Backyard Bird Count.
An Audubon-Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology collaboration in citizen science. Plan to participate one or more days from your home or a site of your choice. See article, this issue.

MONDAY, MARCH 23 THROUGH SUNDAY, APRIL 26 Salamander Escorts.
See article, this issue.
Don't forget to sign up.

SUNDAY, MAY 10 7:30-10:30 AM Warbler Warm-Up. Mike Winslow and Warren King will lead a search for newly arrived spring migrants. Hone your birding identification skills before leaf-out. Co-sponsored by The Watershed Center. Meet at the Bristol Waterworks, Plank Road east of North Street, Bristol.

SATURDAY, MAY 16 Otter Creek Audubon Birdathon. Help support our activities through the year by contributing to our major annual fundraiser. See article in next *Otter Tracks*.

SATURDAY, JUNE 13 9 AM – NOON Follow the Water: Protecting the Water Quality of Otter Creek with Rain Gardens and Green Roofs.
See what others have done and you can do to help control storm water run-off. A one-mile walk in Middlebury, starting at Otter View Park on Pulp Mill Bridge Road. An Otter Creek Audubon-Middlebury Area Land Trust collaboration led by Chris Robbins. For questions please call Suzanne Young at MALT, 388-1007.

Related Events

THURSDAY, MARCH 19 8 AM West Rutland Marsh Monitoring Walk. This is a monthly bird monitoring exercise organized by Rutland County Audubon. Leader: Roy Pilcher (775-3461). Meet at West Rutland Price Chopper parking area at 8 AM.

SATURDAY, APRIL 18 8 AM West Rutland Marsh Monitoring Walk. These monthly bird monitoring walks alternate between Thursdays and Saturdays throughout the year. Meet at West Rutland Price Chopper parking area at 8 AM.

SECOND ANNUAL CABIN FEVER LECTURE SERIES

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 19 7 PM Lake Champlain's Winter Story. Join author Mike Winslow, staff scientist of the Lake Champlain Committee, for an illustrated discussion of winter conditions of Lake Champlain. Downstairs at Ilsley Library, 75 Main Street, Middlebury.

THURSDAY, MARCH 19 7 PM Will Climate Change Affect Vermont's Birds? Illustrated lecture and discussion of the projected impacts of climate change on the distribution of Vermont's birds by Jim Shallow, Audubon Vermont Director of Science and Policy. Downstairs at Ilsley Library, 75 Main Street, Middlebury.

No Ordinary Birds

continued from page 6

Then, one morning we saw the nest on the ground, upside down. The three chicks, much too young to fly, were huddled in a wet pile beside it. They must have spent most of the night there. We immediately decided that John should go out and put the nest back into the bush and the birds back into the nest. They had no chance there on the wet ground out in the open. First John wedged the now muddy bottom of the nest back onto the same branches, and then he picked up the three chicks and tucked them into the almost upright nest. Sure enough, the parents were back feeding them fifteen minutes later.

Alas, later in the day we found one of the not-yet-able-to-fly chicks had fallen back onto the ground and flopped a little

way out into the open lawn. The male Robin was in the process of feeding it a huge night crawler. Or at least he was trying to. He jammed one end down the throat of the chick and watched as it gulped and gulped, only to have over half of the crawler still hanging sideways out of its mouth. The crawler was too big for the tiny chick to swallow or to maneuver. It was stuck. No problem for the adult bird. He hopped over, grabbed the dangling end, flipped it directly forward, straightened it out, and in two more gulps the chick swallowed the rest of the crawler. Impressive evidence of problem solving by this much maligned species. But the chick was still in danger, so John declared that, since he had once played god, he might as well finish the job. He marched out,

scooped up the chick, and placed it once again firmly back into the safety of the nest. And now comes the happily-ever-after part. The male and female continued their duties, and three days later we watched all three chicks fledge.

Just as we seem to have a tendency toward anthropomorphism, I suspect that our species also can't keep from making unfair judgments about creatures different from us. Perhaps we can benefit from having our prejudices jostled now and then. We have birds to thank for that. Whether we are peering through a spotting scope at a Channel-billed Toucan in Trinidad or doing a double-take at the sight of a large hawk on a telephone pole as we drive to work, we notice birds. And as for ordinary birds, I've never seen one. 🐾

No Ordinary Birds

by Barbara Brosnan

We hang our aluminum extension ladder sideways on the back of the shed. One morning John noticed a small pile of sticks loosely littering the space between a couple of the rungs and reached up to brush them off. Fortunately he stopped. In the middle of this most pathetic excuse for a nest were two small cream-colored eggs.

When I was growing up there was only one bird that my father did not like. For him, hearing the long soft mournful notes of its call was just a bit too ghostly a reminder of our own mortality. It was, of course, the Mourning Dove, also known rather disparagingly as the not-quite-as-smart-as-a-box-of-rocks “Mo Do.” What John happened upon that morning was a nest belonging to a pair of Mourning Doves that had been publicly displaying their affection in our back yard for the previous two weeks. Oh well. Might as well leave it be.

Leave it be we did, only to have our prejudices against this humble species permanently adjusted. The loyalty and dedication of these two birds would put many other species of birds and mammals to shame. Just instinct, just preservation of the species of course, but nevertheless a remarkable display of caregiving. One bird remained on the nest as the other assumed guard duty on the ridge of a nearby barn. They switched at day’s end. We kept a watch of our own through the barn windows,



Robin nestling
Photo by Barbara Brosnan

bearing witness as eggs became hatchlings and hatchlings fledged. We had begun to feel a bit like foster grandparents. Could this human anthropomorphism be an instinct within our own species?

Could it serve some purpose in our own survival? In any case, this healthy family of four continued foraging and feeding together in our yard for the remainder of the summer.

Then there is the American Robin. How ordinary can you get? *Turdus migratorius*. Ha ha. Again, not the brightest of our feathered friends. Well, this summer a pair of Robins built a nest in the lilac bush right outside our living room window. Once again we found ourselves monitoring the progress of naked hatchlings and their hard working parents. Now, if you remember, we had a series of weeks when thunderstorms came up like clockwork each afternoon accompanied by wild winds and torrents of rain. John and I watched that female bird day after day as she hung onto both sides of the top of the nest for all she was worth while she, the nest, the branch and the entire bush was whipped from side to side and back again. The rain soaked everything as she desperately tried to keep her chicks warm and dry.

cont. on page 5

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