



Otter Tracks

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Great Backyard Bird Count February 18th–21st, 2011

birds of 602 species. Northern Cardinal was reported on the most checklists (53,513), while American Robin was the most numerous bird (1,850,427). 1.4 million of the American Robins were reported from St. Petersburg FL!

Vermonters recorded 30,819 birds of 75 species in 2010, compared with 44,645 birds of 80 species in 2009. Among Vermont towns, Rutland reported the most species (32) and the most checklists (39). Middlebury was third with 18 checklists and 27 species. American Goldfinch was Vermont's most abundant species (4,909), followed by Black-capped Chickadee, Mourning Dove and Blue Jay. Black-capped Chickadees appeared on the most Vermont checklists, 605 out of 696. In 2009 Pine Siskin was most abundant in Vermont (6,979), but only 147 were reported in 2010. It was a poor winter for other northern migrants as well.

Participants who want to hone their bird identification skills can learn more from the GBBC web site, which offers identification tips and photos, sounds, maps, and natural history information for 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. 🐾

The 18th annual Great Backyard Bird Count is coming to a feeder, park, or lake near you! Join tens of thousands of backyard birders to create a clear picture of bird distribution and abundance across the continent on any or all of the four days of Friday through Monday, February 18 through 21.

Here's what you do:

-  Count the highest total of each bird species for at least 15 minutes in your yard, in a local park, on vacation, or wherever you choose to do your counts. Taking the highest total avoids duplicate counting.
-  Send your totals for one or more days during the GBBC period to www.birdsource.org/gbbc. Use a separate checklist for each day. The on-line checklist is user-friendly.
-  Although sending in your list by Internet is strongly preferred, you can mail in the form enclosed in this Otter Tracks, using 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, Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, 159 Sapsucker Woods Rd, Ithaca NY 14850 by Friday, February 26.

Continentwide in 2010, observers submitted 97,331 checklists documenting 11,233,600



OCAS Mission:

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

OTTER CREEK AUDUBON SOCIETY

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Rough-Legged Hawk from the 2010 GBBC
Photo by Jeannette Tasey Molt

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2010-2011

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A Glimmer of Hope in a Stormy Sea of Climate News



VIEWPOINT

Editorial by Warren King

Word is in from NOAA that November 2010 was the warmest November on record, in spite of a persistent cold spell in Europe and a strong La Nina in the Pacific. 2010 tied for the warmest year since the advent of instrumental mea-



surements, even though solar irradiance has been at a cyclical minimum since 1970. Ice sheet loss from Greenland and Antarctica has risen in the past two years.

The consensus on the U.N. Cancun climate talks that concluded in December was mixed, a far better outcome than its predecessor in Copenhagen. Mexico excelled as host to this conference. All major issues were aired and all countries were heard. Mexico's leadership produced progress on a multilateral agreement (Bolivia's objections notwithstanding). A spirit of unity encompassed limiting temperature rise to 2°C, framing legally the mitigation commitments arrived at in Copenhagen, providing a system for reducing deforestation, and establishing a long-term Green Climate Fund with \$30 billion committed for mitigation and adaptation in developing countries.

However, skeptics say \$100 billion a year is needed for the Green Climate Fund, a figure unlikely to be met, given today's economic uncertainties. The Obama administration's offer to reduce U.S. emissions by 17 percent below 2005 levels is unacceptably weak. If the current voluntary carbon reduction targets of all industrialized nations are fully met, the result would be CO₂ levels of 750 ppm and a rise of at least 4°C by 2050, a far cry from the 350 ppm CO₂ and 2°C rise that would stabilize our environment. There will be much work to do for the next U.N. climate change meeting in Durban, South Africa in December 2011.

At the annual meeting of the Association of Behavior Analysis International glacier climatologist Lonnie G Thompson said, "Climatologists are a stolid group, not given to theatrical rantings about falling skies. Why then are climatologists speaking out about the dangers of global warming? The answer is that virtually all of us are now convinced that global warming poses a clear and present danger to civilization." It's a pity that half of newly elected U.S. House and Senate members deny climate change. They might be able to do something about it. 🐾



Otter Creek Audubon on Facebook

Otter Creek Audubon is on Facebook! Find us there to keep updated on our events, programs and activities. You can share your sightings and pictures and interact with us. You can use the site even if you don't have a Facebook account. Just click on our website (ottercreekaudubon.org) and the Facebook button. 🐾

Get Active for Audubon

Increasingly, public issues arise that are of strong and direct interest to Audubon members in Addison County. These issues might be at the local, state, national or international level. To receive Action Alerts on state and national issues of urgency click on the advocacy page of the OCAS website (ottercreekaudubon.org) and then click on the Great Horned Owl icon or go to <http://audubonaction.org/audubon/join.html>. Brief summaries of current priority issues will be on our Facebook page. 🐾





Galen Fastie with a four-toed salamander at Morgan Road.
Photo by Chris Fastie

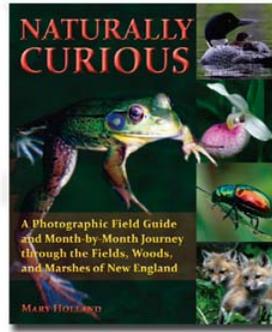
Salamander Escorts in 2011

Once again, OCAS will provide limited salamander escort coverage this spring at two sites, Morgan Road in Salisbury and North Street in New Haven. On an ideal evening, wet and warm, these sites can experience a thousand or more amphibians of seven species crossing from their wooded wintering sites to vernal pools where they breed. Although traffic at these sites averages only a few vehicles per hour, moving amphibians to the road shoulder ensures them a safe journey. It also provides a less dangerous environment for you to experience the spectacle of spring amphibian migration than at crossings with greater, higher speed traffic.

The window for our program is from Monday, March 21st to Sunday, April 24th. Otter Creek Audubon will alert our email list, will post notice on OCAS' Facebook page, and have organizers present at both sites on two nights that we consider to be "sure things" based on the meteorological evidence,

Movement starts about 8:30 pm and can go to 1 am. Volunteers gather data for an hour or 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 others 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 on to the 2011 salamander volunteer email list. When you sign on we will provide you with directions and other information. Please provide an email address that you will see around suppertime. Email and Facebook are the preferred modes of contact. If telephone is the only way you would receive a timely message, provide your phone number. During the program window we will give you as much lead time as possible, ideally with a morning "heads up" alert and an early evening confirmation if the weather continues to look auspicious.



Book Review:

Naturally Curious

A Photographic Field Guide and Month-by-Month Journey Through the Fields, Woods, and Marshes of New England

by Mary Holland

Trafalgar Square, 2010, 474 pp.

Review by Warren King

Here is a book on natural history that will turn you from a nature tyro to a pro in one reading. Well, maybe two. It focuses on New England and on the life cycles, ecology, and interconnectedness of the species you are likely to meet in the course of wandering the woods, fields and wetlands of your hometown. Mary Holland took all but 68 of the more than 1000 photos that illustrate points she makes in her text. Chiho Kaneko prepared 36 of the 38 illustrations. Although the book calls itself a photographic field guide, it tips the scale at 2 lb. 9 oz., disqualifying it as a regular occupant in my daypack, and probably yours.

Each chapter features a month, starting with March, the month of "awakening" in New England. Holland selects several amphibians, reptiles, birds, mammals, insects and arachnids, and plants and fungi, different ones each month, profiling what each selected species is up to in that month. She picks a subset of the month's species or behaviors for one- or two-page "Closer Look" coverage. Illustrations provide detailed anatomy or characteristics of plants or animals that cannot be captured on a photo; for example the parts of an Amanita mushroom, a grass flower, a typical fern, incomplete vs. complete insect metamorphosis. "Fast Facts" sidebars provide a variety of quick and handy information about a species, e.g. European honey bee nectar is 80 percent water, and, after evaporation in hives, is reduced to 16 percent water and is called honey; chipmunks are occasional carnivores, eating mice, snakes and insects. And there are "Who Knews" salted throughout. Who knew that male turkey scat is J-shaped, while female scat is a round lump? Who knew that crossbills and redpolls have two-lobed pockets in their necks for seed storage?

She covers 191 bird species, almost all of the birds that occur regularly in Vermont. Coverage of amphibians, reptiles, and mammals appears to be equally comprehensive; coverage of insects, arachnids, plants and fungi less so, as would be expected in these species-rich taxonomic groups. The bibliography covers ten pages, two columns to a page. A useful list of readily available books and audio resources is broken down by category.

This book is a labor of love. It is remarkably comprehensive, yet never encyclopedic. It is, in fact, delightfully readable and entertaining. It is the distillation of a lifetime of natural history study, augmented by the published wisdom of others in the field. The book is well worth the hefty price for the photos alone. No pair of pages is without a photo or illustration; most have three or five, some eight or nine. I found no redundancies and no errors, typographical or otherwise. Look elsewhere for an identification guide or in-depth study of an organism. What this book is is a broad, detailed view of the intricacies of the natural world in which we live. It is splendid. You owe it to yourself and your family to have a copy. 🐾

House and Purple Finches

by Susan Roney Drennan

Before 1940, the House Finch (*Carpodacus mexicanus*) was resident only in the southwestern United States and Mexico. Like so many pretty little finches, numbers were imported to the East Coast and sold to exotic and caged-bird fanciers. In 1940, “Hollywood Finches”, as they were called at the time, were declared by authorities illegal trade east of the Rocky Mountains under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Frightened that they would be caught red-handed and prosecuted, what did pet-shop owners and bird dealers do with them? They “liberated” them. Following the release of a small number of these caged birds on Long Island, New York, the eastern population grew rapidly, attesting to their phenomenal adaptability and fecundity. By the late 1990s, rapid colonization turned this species into a common backyard bird throughout most of the contiguous United States and southern Canada. This highly social bird is the default resident finch in urban and suburban parks, gardens, and settled habitats across most of the US, earning it the name “The Everywhere Finch.”

Since January 1994, House Finches, especially in eastern populations, have been detected with a disease called mycoplasmal conjunctivitis. Infected birds have swollen, red, runny, or crusty eyes, which, in severe cases, become swollen shut or crusted over. Obviously, birds in this condition find it difficult to feed. They easily surrender to starvation and predation. Although the most obvious sign of the disease is exhibited in the eyes, the bird can also develop warty lesions on the head, legs, and feet. These symptoms can directly kill birds, although respiratory complications caused by the conjunctivitis actually kill House Finches. Avian mycoplasmal conjunctivitis is *not* harmful to human beings. Observations of diseased House Finches should be reported to Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology at cornellbirds@cornell.edu.

While looking out at your winter bird feeding stations, be aware that you may have Purple Finches (*Carpodacus purpureus*) seeking out your prized thistle and the thinnest oil-type sunflower seeds. If you put out pumpkin and hemp seeds Purple Finches will devour them. This is one of the most attrac-



Male Purple Finch (left) and Male House Finch (right).

Photos by J Carmichael (left) and Baser (right)

Purple Finch, male

Larger, more robust

Heavy conical bill

Raspberry red wash on head, back, wings, breast

Unstriped sides and undertail

Dark lateral throat stripe

Purple Finch, female

White eyebrow above brown cheek

White chest, brown stripes

Faint wingbars

House Finch, male

Smaller, slighter

Shorter, curved bill

Red forehead, chin, breast, rump

Streaked sides

No throat stripe

House Finch, female

No discernable face pattern

Dirty white chest with dark stripes

Thin whitish wingbars

tive and conspicuous finches, found in small flocks in winter. About 75% of their diet comes in the form of weed seeds but they eat tree seeds as well.

Purple Finches come readily to feeders but have become much less numerous in the Northeast where competition with the introduced House Sparrow and burgeoning House Finch populations drive them farther back into the woods or actually limit their population numbers. 🐾

Water Vapor vs Carbon Dioxide

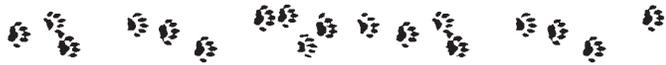
In a paper in *Geophysical Research Texas* A and M researchers confirmed experimentally that water vapor, the most abundant greenhouse gas, can double the climate warming of increased levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Further, the increase in temperature causes more water vapor to enter the atmosphere, which produces, in turn, yet higher temperature. The researchers refer to the relationship between warming and water vapor as a “spiraling cycle,” an excellent, and in this

case unfortunate, example of a positive feedback loop.

Recent studies by NASA published in *Science* experimentally clarified the relationship between water vapor and other non-condensing greenhouse gases, including carbon dioxide. Carbon dioxide accounts for 20 percent of the greenhouse effect, water vapor 75 percent. But in the absence of carbon dioxide or other non-condensing greenhouse gases, water vapor quickly condenses and precipitates

to the earth’s surface. Fully 80 percent of the radiative forcing that results in global warming is due to the amount of atmospheric carbon dioxide. Carbon dioxide concentration is the thermostat that ultimately controls the temperature of the earth. Without it the earth is a frozen shell; at 285 parts per million CO₂ the average global temperature is 55 degrees F; at 390 ppm, our present global level, the earth is about 2 degrees hotter. 🐾

OCAS Calendar of Events February – May 2011



FRIDAY THRU MONDAY
FEBRUARY 18-21, 2011 GREAT BACKYARD BIRD COUNT.
See article in this issue.

SUNDAY, MAY 8
7:30 - 10:30 AM WARBLER WARM UP: Ron Payne
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.
Call Warren at 388-4082 if in doubt about the weather.

MARSH, MEADOW AND GRASSLAND WILDLIFE WALKS

A monthly joint OCAS-MALT event. We invite community members to help us survey birds and other wildlife at Otter View Park and Hurd Grassland. Meet at Otter View Park parking area, Weybridge Street and Pulp Mill Bridge Road, Middlebury. Shorter and longer routes possible. For information call 388-1007 or 388-6829.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 12, 8 – 10 AM
Leader: Greg Borah, local wildlife tracking expert

THURSDAY, MARCH 10, 8 – 10 AM
Leader: Josh Phillips

SATURDAY, APRIL 9, 8 – 10 AM
Leaders: Ron Payne

THURSDAY, MAY 12, 8 – 10 AM
Leader: Gary Starr

OCAS to Sponsor Vermont County Bird Quest in Addison County

The OCAS board has just voted to sponsor Addison County's participation in a creative challenge of the Vermont Center for Ecostudies and the North Branch Nature Center. The event will feature competition between Vermont counties in finding the largest number of bird species in a year. Individuals or groups may take part by posting individual sightings or lists on Vermont eBird. eBird will automatically compile county lists. There will be prizes for the winning county at year's end. The captains of the quest for Addison County will be Steve Trombulak of Middlebury College and Ron Payne, newly elected board member of Otter Creek Audubon. 🐾

FOURTH ANNUAL CABIN FEVER LECTURE SERIES SECOND THURSDAYS IN JANUARY–MARCH

All events held downstairs at Ilsley Library,
75 Main Street, Middlebury.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 2011, 7 PM
Loons of Lake Dunmore: Life on a Busy Lake
– Mike Korkuc, photographer and nature biographer,
and Sally Buteau, former Vermont Loon Biologist.

THURSDAY, MARCH 10, 2011, 7 PM
*The North Country Trail: Connecting the Green
Mountains to the Prairies* – Josh Phillips, Executive
Director, Middlebury Area Land Trust.

RELATED EVENT

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 2011, 9 AM – 4 PM
WINTER WILDLIFE TRACKING WORKSHOP

A day-long workshop offered by the Salisbury Conservation Commission featuring several tracking experts, focusing on techniques for recording and mapping tracks at road crossings. Free lunch and materials. For free registration contact Chris Fastie at conservation@townofsalisbury.org or 352-9028.



Song Sparrow
Photo by Michelle Black

Parthenogenesis in Snakes

While it has been known that parthenogenesis, asexual reproduction, occurs in some fungi and insects and rarely in fish, amphibians and birds, a study reported in *Science News* on November 4th documents the first recorded birth of large litters of female baby boa constrictors by a captive female with no genetic evidence that a male was involved in the reproduction. Mammals are the only group now for which asexual reproduction has not been documented. 🐾

Middlebury Christmas Bird Count: Reflections

By David Dregallo

On the cold morning of December 19th my mom and I participated in the Middlebury Christmas bird count. As I got dressed in long johns, snow pants and mittens I saw my brother still asleep in the next room. "Lucky" I said to myself. Little did I know that I was really the lucky one.

We arrived at Rosie's for a group breakfast at 6 AM, and I walked into a room full of people bright eyed and bushy tailed (or so it seemed) having their morning coffee or orange juice.

The Middlebury Christmas bird count covers a circle with a fifteen-mile radius with Middlebury on the northeastern edge. Part of Lake Champlain is included in the circle. It is divided into twenty or so different sections. Each group gets a section and they patrol that section to the best of their abilities. My mom and I were paired with Warren and Barry King in Section 14.

At sunrise we were on the Legion fields along Otter Creek, and there was a heavy coating of hoar frost on all of the bushes, trees and the taller grass. I was cold, and then I looked up and I could just see the glow, and then there it was, the sun shining through the trees on the top of the Green Mountain ridge, lighting up all of the frost. Then the magic was gone and it was just another beautiful sunrise in Vermont. As we made our way down Creek Road I started to realize that I was the lucky one. We saw sparrows, a Cooper's hawk and a few other birds. Then we moved on to the abutments of the old Three Mile Bridge. We found the scanty remains of two muskrats. Three of the paws still had fur attached.

We parked our car and went into a hemlock woods next to The Lodge at Otter Creek in the hopes of finding a Golden-crowned Kinglet. From there we ventured onto the T.A.M. near the Middle School where we saw eight to ten bluebirds and a Great Blue Heron. By then it was 11:30 and my mom and I decided to call it quits for the day (until the potluck).

On the night of the bird count my mom, little brother, and I all went to count compilers Jim and Kris Andrews' house for a potluck dinner. After the dinner everyone went over the day's bird sightings. Several owls, including Barred, Great Horned and Screech, were spotted. Our group saw the *only* Great Blue Heron this year. The number for the most commonly seen bird was a whopping 5,733 starlings, small compared to the 12,962 seen in 2000.

All in all I thought that my experience was very rewarding and I cannot wait to do it next year. 🐾



Red-bellied Woodpecker on the Middlebury Christmas Bird Count
Photo by Gary Starr

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