



Otter Creek Audubon Society

February
2012

Otter Tracks

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February 17–20, 2012

Great Backyard Bird Count



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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The 2012 Great Backyard Bird Count takes place continent-wide from Friday, February 17, to Monday, February 20. Count the birds in your backyard or favorite birding spot and submit your list to birdsource.org/gbbc/ using the convenient tally sheet inserted in this issue. Birdsource is a collaboration of National Audubon and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. The result provides a 4-day snapshot of bird distribution and abundance over much of North America.

Here's what you do:

-  Count the highest total of each bird species for at least 15 minutes in your yard, or wherever you want. 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 enclosed form, using a new copy for each day you count. Don't forget to make extras 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 24.

Last year 92,218 checklists were submit-

ted, covering 11.4 million birds of 594 species. European Starlings totaled 1.3 million (968,000 from one checklist from Stewartstown PA), followed by American Robin at 1.0 million birds. Northern Cardinal was the most frequently reported (45,000 checklists), New York had the most checklists (5,817), Texas had the most species (326), Pennsylvania had the most birds (don't forget Stewartstown), and Mentor, Ohio had the most checklists for one town (1833).

In Vermont observers submitted 662 checklists, reporting 33,899 birds of 82 species. Common Redpoll was the most abundant species (6,111 birds), followed by Black-capped Chickadee (3,855 birds), but Black-capped Chickadee was reported on 602 lists. 2011 was a Common Redpoll year in Vermont (6011 birds), but not a Pine Siskin year (216 birds). Compare that to 2010 when Vermont tallied 2,903 Common Redpolls and 6,976 Pine Siskins, a bumper crop indeed. Rutland and Williston led the state with 24 checklists each. Middlebury, the highest ranked Addison County town, had 10 checklists.

Those wanting to continue this kind of monitoring through the winter should look into participating in Project FeederWatch by going to www.birds.cornell.edu/pfw/. 

Otter Creek Audubon Society

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2011-2012

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Tepid Results in Durban

Editorial by
Warren King



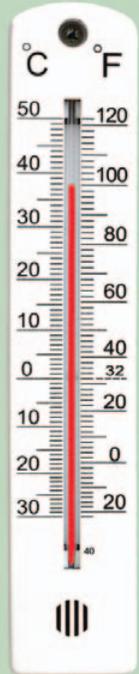
VIEWPOINT

Amid meagre fanfare the Durban climate talks concluded in early December 2011. The best that can be said was that the parties agreed to put an agreement in place by 2015 that would force emission cuts by 2020. Putting off action until 2020 ensures that we will exceed a 3-degree C increase, maybe more, and that the price of adaptation measures will rise severely. Over 3 degrees C will put us close to these tipping points:

- Dieback of Amazon forests
- Coral reefs replaced by soft plants
- Greenland ice sheet loss
- Permafrost thawing
- Release of methane hydrates from the ocean floor

The party nations have thus far voluntarily agreed to reduction targets that leave us about 10 gigatons of carbon dioxide equivalent short of the 44GtCO₂eq/yr needed to maintain a 2-degree C increase, the level that is likely to be tolerable without massive mitigation. The Durban agreement does not address this gap, but it does sunset the most obstructive part of the Kyoto Protocol, its failure to address reductions by developing countries. Also agreed at Durban was creation of a \$100 billion a year Green Climate Fund to help poorer nations with adaptation, but the source of funding is yet to be determined. The new agreement of 2015, if it can be achieved, will apply to *all* nations, not a selected list of nations.

A new paradigm is needed for an agreement that will bind all nations to a fair but effective emissions reduction schedule. That's a tall order, but the longer we wait the more destructive and expensive it gets. 🐾



Home for a spotted salamander - a damp celler in Bethel, VT
Photo by Matt Stevens

Once again, OCAS will provide limited salamander escort coverage this spring, but only at the site at Morgan Road in Salisbury. On an ideal evening, wet and warm, this site 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 this site aver-

2012 Salamander Escorts

ages 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 19th to Sunday, April 15th. Otter Creek Audubon will alert our 2012 email list, will post notice on OCAS' Facebook page, and have organizers present at the site 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 arrive or leave when they wish, gathering data for an hour

or two. You will be on a public road, and 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.

Please contact Warren or Barry King at 388-4082 or kinglet@together.net to sign on to the 2012 salamander volunteer email list. *Sign up even if you participated last year.* Provide an email address that you will see around suppertime. 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. Email and Facebook are the preferred modes of contact, but if telephone is the only way you would receive a timely message, provide your phone number. When you sign on, we will provide you with directions and other information. 🐾

Ferrisburgh Christmas Bird Count

By Mike Winslow

A stiff north wind blew throughout the 52nd Ferrisburgh Christmas Bird Count held December 17, 2011, providing a stark contrast to the up-to-then very mild winter. We had a mixture of migrating waterfowl, lingering landbird migrants and avian residents. Forty-five field observers and five feeder watchers identified 81 species. Large flocks of migrating geese, some counted by multiple observers, complicated determination of actual numbers of birds. Assuming one-third of Canada and Snow Geese had been double counted, observers still tallied 51,166 birds, the most recorded in the history of the count. Our ten-year average is 79 species and 20,376 birds.

We recorded 23 species of waterfowl and four species of gull. Highlights included three Cackling Geese, two Greater White-fronted Geese, a record 47 Common Loons, Surf Scoter, American Wigeon, Green-winged Teal and Bonaparte's Gull and 2,100 Ring-billed Gulls, another record. Mixed in with record numbers of American Robins and Eastern Bluebirds were seven Yellow-rumped Warblers (first since 2005), a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (three times in the last five years), and a Hermit Thrush (fourth time). For a complete account and species list, see ottercreekaudubon.org and click on the Ferrisburgh CBC Report under Latest News. 🐾

Middlebury Christmas Bird Count

By James S. Andrews

This year 42 field birders and 14 observers at feeders identified 20,857 birds of 77 species on Sunday, December 18 within our 15-mile-diameter count circle. This circle is centered on the Lemon Fair in eastern Bridport. The Middlebury count is one of over 1,800 held throughout North and Central America.

Southern Lake Champlain and Otter Creek were open; consequently, we found an impressive total of 22 water-related species. A Red-necked Grebe and Lesser Black-backed Gull were firsts for our count. Lesser Scaups (1,140), Common Goldeneyes (1,461), Common Mergansers (516), Canada Geese (2,316), Bald Eagles (8) and Red-bellied Woodpeckers (28) set record high numbers. No Red-breasted Nuthatches were found, a first for our count. Five owling teams located a total of 35 owls of five species. A warm fall and lots of grapes, juniper berries, and other fruit kept a record number of American Robins (1783) in our count circle, along with seven Yellow-rumped Warblers and even a Hermit Thrush.

We tallied 77 species due to the warm fall and resulting open water, tying our second-highest total. For a complete account and species list, see ottercreekaudubon.org and click on the Middlebury CBC Report under Latest News. 🐾

A Flash of Cerulean Blue...

By Ian Worley

Looking for a bird best seen lying on your back? Then let's go looking this spring for one of Vermont's most uncommon and elusive birds. Find some maturing, tall deciduous forest near a forest opening. Scan for a glimpse of Cerulean blue flashing high in a spring-green canopy, a bird with a breastband necklace – whose discovery is a thrill worth all the skyward searching it demands.

We are in luck in Addison County; we have twice as many Ceruleans (14 in 2010 and 8 in 2011) as all the rest of Vermont. The largest collection of these canopy denizens is on the lower slopes of Snake Mountain.

Ceruleans are best located by the songs of the males. However, trickster nature doesn't make our life easy, with several mimics making identification of these blue gems by sound alone dangerous business – even though the song is strong and simple. Blackburnian, Black-throated Blue and Northern Parula warblers have songs that can be indistinguishable except to the most experienced Cerulean-ite. And comparing with simple recorded songs is quite unreliable. It is so tough that I've created the Black-throated Blue Cerulean Club for folks who have bushwhacked to see a singing Cerulean only to discover a cheery Black-Throated Blue!

Vermont's sparse reports probably have quite a number of errant identifications. Moreover, eBird maps give an inflated impression of Cerulean numbers with single birds having numerous pointers scattered about. Breeding is recorded from only three sites, with various levels of certainty. Only four locations

have had birds observed for more than one year and by multiple birders.

Documenting breeding is a challenging task. The tiny nests are built on a fork of a small branch in the highest part of the tallest trees several feet from the trunk – virtually unseeable. The female does not vocalize, and if

seen it is usually very high up in the canopy, thus seen only from beneath... and the bottomside of a Cerulean female is as softly undistinguished as a warbler can be. Only three or four females have been reported in Vermont; I've seen two, or so I believe.

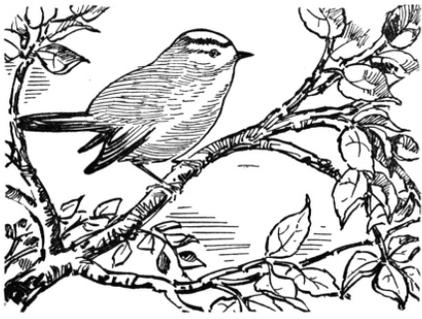
OK, let's plan to find some Ceruleans. They are only around for a little over a month! A typical year on Snake Mountain has birds arriving May 11th and vocal males securing territory the next ten days. A quiet period – May 23rd to June 3rd – likely incubation time. Males renew their singing but become restless. By June 26th all are gone. Ceruleans do not have multiple broods, and travel to winter in South America.

Find tall woods, wander near openings, take your time, learn the song, verify every possible songster, and do it from mid-May to early June. With luck, you will be rewarded with a life-long memory of that flash of Cerulean blue. 🐾



A flash of Cerulean Blue

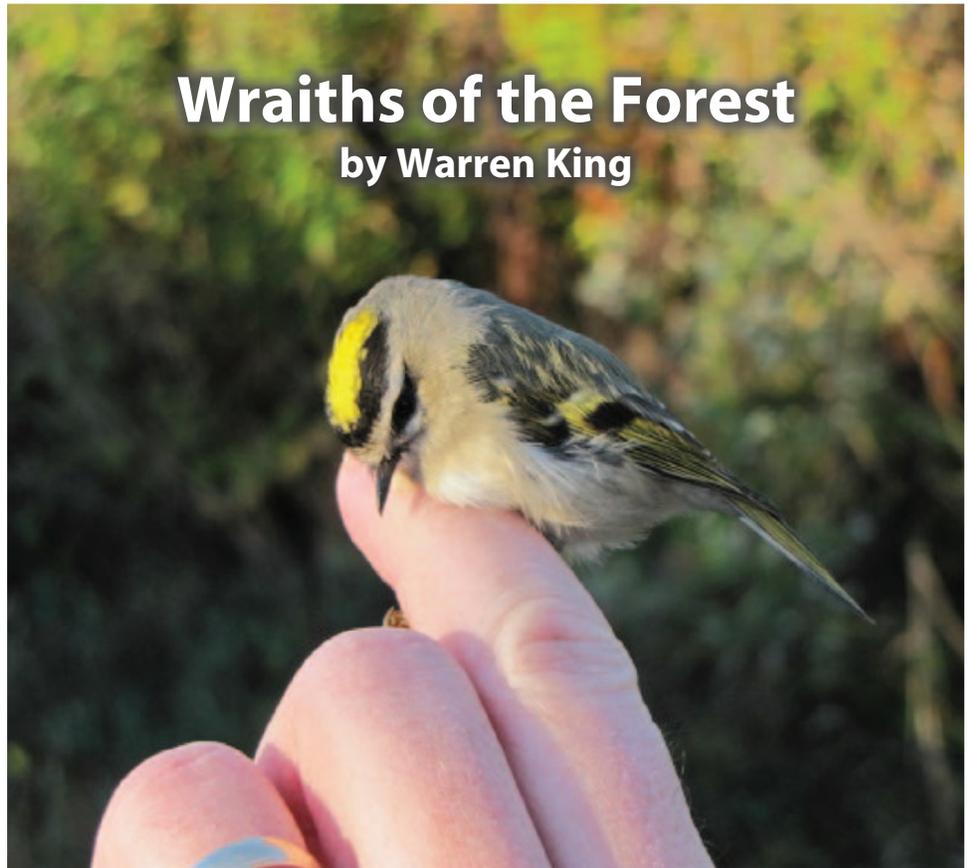
Photo by mdf



In his 2003 book *Winter World* Bernd Heinrich, professor of biology at the University of Vermont, describes his researches on the winter survival strategies and adaptations of the Golden-crowned Kinglet, the “wraith of the forest”. With a body weight of only 5-6 grams, the weight of two pennies or half the weight of a Black-capped Chickadee, this species is the smallest bird species that inhabits Vermont year-round. Animals with larger bodies retain heat more readily; those with smaller bodies must work harder at heat generation or conservation. Kinglets survive thanks to a number of behavioral and physiological adaptations that allow them to conserve the heat they generate.

Kinglets’ feathers are key to winter survival. Feathers comprise 7.4 percent of their body weight. They fluff them up an inch and bury their bills and eyes, the organs responsible for greatest heat loss, into the fluff on their backs to conserve heat at night. An efficient heat exchange system allows them to drop the temperature of their feet and lower legs to just above freezing. The temperature differential between the birds’ core and the outside air on a cold night can be as much as 172 degrees F.

During the day kinglet body temperature is 111 degrees F., 4-5 degrees warmer than most birds’. Although they are half a chickadee’s weight, their body fat weighs the same as a chickadee’s body fat. Their most important heat source is continuous day and night shivering, but the energy needed to shiver requires them to forage continually during the short daylight hours. The food they collect provides only about half the calories they would need to get through a 24-hour day in winter, according to Heinrich. Conservation provides the rest, which seems to explain why they travel in twos and threes in winter. Two kinglets huddling together overnight



Golden-crowned Kinglet Photo by Gary Starr

in a snow cave on a spruce branch lose 23 percent less heat than a single bird; three kinglets together lose 37 percent less heat.

In further analyzing their energy budget, Heinrich concludes that the energy shortfall they experience regularly in cold weather can only be made up by controlled torpor, lowering their body temperature through the night, although no kinglet has yet been found in torpor. The danger of torpor is that without careful control an animal can chill beyond recovery and freeze.

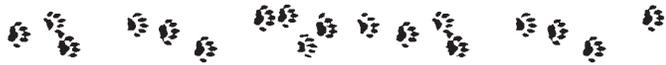
Continually on the edge, kinglets have a short life span, averaging a year or less. To counteract their high mortality rate, females lay 8-11 eggs in a clutch, about twice the average for songbirds. As soon as the young can be left unbrooded the female begins a second clutch of 8-11 eggs in a new nest. She does the incubating and the brooding, while the male brings a steady stream of small insects to the two nests. The female’s brood patch can only contact two or three eggs at one time. She uses her legs to help turn the eggs and to

incubate. Her legs swell with blood, turn beet red, and reach 102 degrees F. when she is incubating.

In winter Golden-crowned Kinglets forage among the tips of the smallest branches in coniferous and mixed woods. Heinrich and his graduate students discovered that they are searching for the larvae of a geometrid moth called the one-spotted variant. This discovery confirmed kinglets’ winter diet and revealed the wintering location, previously unknown, of this fairly common moth. The larvae were not identifiable to species, so Heinrich resuscitated long-frozen larvae and raised them to adult stage, when they could be identified.

When you next encounter the “wraiths of the forest” ponder the great number of adaptations that make their winter survival in the Vermont woods possible. A persistent storm, a shortage of geometrid moth larvae, or wrong choice of roosting site, and it’s all over. Luck certainly plays a role in kinglet survival, too. 🐾

OCAS Calendar of Events February – May 2012



FRIDAY-MONDAY **GREAT BACKYARD BIRD COUNT.**
FEBRUARY 17-20, 2012 See upcoming article in February
2012 *Otter Tracks*.

SUNDAY, MAY 13, 2012 **WARBLER WARM-UP.** Ron Payne
7:30 – 10 AM and Warren King will lead a
search for newly arrived spring
migrants. Hone your birding identification skills before leaf-
out. Co-sponsored with 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.

FIFTH ANNUAL CABIN FEVER LECTURE SERIES (SECOND WEDNESDAYS JAN-MARCH)

Downstairs at Ilsley Library, 75 Main Street, Middlebury.
See article on pg. 4 for details.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 8, 2012, 7 PM
Beautiful Birds of Costa Rica. Presented by Julia
and Chris Child.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 14, 2012, 7 PM
Bluebirds and More. Presented by John Rogers.

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 infor-
mation call 388-1007 or 388-6829.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 8 – 10 AM
Leader: Barb Otsuka

SATURDAY, MARCH 10, 8 – 10 AM
Leader: Ron Payne

THURSDAY, APRIL 12, 8 – 10 AM
Leader to be announced

SATURDAY, MAY 12, 8 – 10 AM
Leader to be announced

Bird Carving Ornament Fundraiser

By Gary Starr

Donations for OCAS were received through the purchase of
70 Starr Decoys bird ornaments from our faithful Audubon
family. Thank you for making this fund raising event a great
success. The variety of birds selected, from Emperor Penguins
to Black-capped Vireos, emphasizes the varied birding interest of
our community. 🐾

Chickadees Cheer as Audubon/Agway 2011 Seed Sale Survives Spring Floods

By Seth Gibson

In spite of the spring floods in the Midwest that ruined a lot
of the seed crops this year, Agway found seeds for the annual
fall sale, and we put together our annual OCAS seed sale. Prices
were up, and the timing was late, but OCAS members were ready,
and ordered 46 bags of seed for winter feeding. As a result of our
participation, Middlebury Agway is donating \$100 to Otter Creek
Audubon.

Thanks to all the OCAS members who participated in the
seed sale, and to folks at Middlebury Agway for their continuing
support. 🐾

County Quest

continued from page 6

be petty and beside the point. When you look past all that, what
was confirmed by our species total is that Addison County is
indeed the best place for birding in the State of Vermont!

We weren't without other bragging rights in the competition
however. Besides the highest species total we also posted the
highest number of eBird checklists at 3086 reporting an amazing
136,459 birds counted by observers over the year. And on the
individual level, Cornwall resident Ian Worley submitted 1144
checklists to eBird, the highest number in the state.

In the end, no matter how you look at it the real winner was
Vermont eBird. This year, every county increased its species total,
number of checklists submitted, and total number of birds count-
ed. And these aren't just meaningless numbers. This is extremely
valuable scientific data helping expand knowledge of species dis-
tribution and abundance.

If you don't like the 2011 outcome, there is a chance to do
something about it in 2012. County Quest will continue this year
and into the future. The more people we have searching for birds
and submitting them to eBird, the better chance we have of com-
ing out on top, so get out there and report your observations. 🐾

Addison County Finishes Third in County Quest

By Ron Payne

Back in January of 2011 the Vermont Center for Ecostudies (VCE) announced County Quest, a friendly competition between the counties of Vermont to see which could find the most bird species in a year. We knew Addison County would be a frontrunner. But VCE also announced there would be a “par weighting system” to level the playing field. Ours would be one of the counties hurt the most by it. And hurt we were. Despite getting the highest species total at 250, we only managed third place in the par weighted rankings.

VCE gave every species of bird in Vermont a point value based on its frequency in each respective county: 1 point for very common species, .5 for uncommon species, and 0 for rare species. The total of those points became a county’s par number. For Addison County the par number was 227.5, the highest in the state. Subtract the par number from the actual number of species found during the year to get the final score for the county. Our score was 22.5. That put us behind Windham and Windsor counties, each of which scored 31 points, a tie broken in favor of Windham County by its higher species total.

We could complain about how we were beaten by frivolous arithmetic, how the game penalizes counties that have been good at reporting in the past, or how it relies too heavily on the luck of having rare species fall in your lap, but that would

cont. on page 5

2011 County Quest Competition Results

County	Checklists	Species	County Par+
Windham	1682	230	31
Windsor	2763	213	31
Addison	3086	250	22.5
Chittenden	2699	245	20.5
Washington	1252	192	18.5
Bennington	1526	198	17.5
Rutland	1910	215	17
Orleans	388	187	13.5
Orange	498	178	12
Lamoille	539	167	7.5
Grand	188	219	7
Franklin	584	196	3.5
Caledonia	234	150	-18
Essex	210	148	-22

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