

OTTER CREEK
AUDUBON SOCIETY



OTTER TRACKS

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Watching the River – Summer 2000!

The Addison County Riverwatch Collaborative (ACRWC) has been meeting and planning through the winter, and still dealing with "newborn" organizational issues! We are looking forward to a summer monitoring season, though there will be some changes. After 11 seasons of operating our own lab, it was decided to send samples out to a private lab for the summer of 2000. The hope is that this will provide consistent and reliable data over the long term, and also free up volunteer and coordinator energy and time to pursue educational and community involvement goals. This means that the sample dates will be both on weekends and weekdays, early in the morning, and that some volunteers will be driving samples to the lab. There will be

volunteer training in mid-June. Sampling dates have been tentatively set for June 28, July 15, July 26, and August 12. Mary Gaudett of Middlebury College has been meeting with us recently. It is encouraging that there is interest on the part of the College and faculty in assisting with data collection and analysis. Additionally, ACRWC received a generous grant from an anonymous source which will substantially fund activities for the coming two years, help to hire a new coordinator, and establish a more stable funding structure. Put us on your schedule this summer and come stand in the river! For more information, call Heidi Willis at 388-9207.

**Rare Crossbill
Sighting in
Addison
County!**
see story page 3



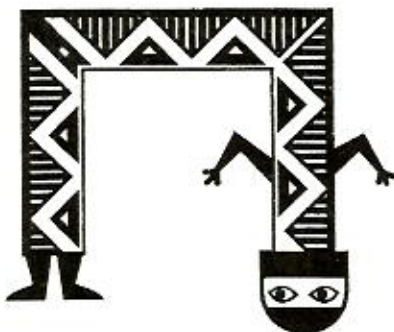
Red Crossbill. Photo by B. Henry/VIREO.

Wildlife Festival & IBA Dedication at Herrick's Cove

On Sunday, May 7, Ascutney Mountain Audubon Society and PG&E Generating will sponsor a Herrick's Cove Wildlife Festival at the Cove in Rockingham, Vermont. The festival is being held in conjunction with the formal dedication of Herrick's Cove as a Vermont Important Bird Area (IBA). Here are some of the activities planned for the festival:

- live owl and hawk programs
- boat cruises to observe birds in and around the cove
- a search for amphibians and reptiles
- a bird carving demonstration
- a fly casting and tying workshop
- nature walks
- "Reading the Landscape" with author and naturalist Tom Wessels
- theatrical performances
- exhibits by the Silvio O. Conte National Fish & Wildlife Refuge, the Vermont Department of Fish & Wildlife, Friends of Herrick's Cove, Putney Mountain Hawkwatch

There will be food and music, as well. Rep. Michael Obuchowski, Speaker of the Vermont House, a representative of PG&E Generating (the landowner), and Jim Shallow, Audubon's State Office Director, will participate in the IBA dedication. The hours are 11 am to 4 pm and admission is free. Herrick's Cove is at the mouth of the Williams River and is reached by taking Rt. 5 north from Exit 6 off I-91. The access road is to the right just north of the Williams River bridge. The public is cordially invited.



BIRDATHON 2000

By Judy Peterson

The OCAS spring Birdathon, which will be held this year on or about May 20th, is our only fund-raiser of the year, an event which benefits our various programs and projects. In recent years the proceeds have covered our contribution to Riverwatch, helped send local children to Audubon nature camps, and enabled us to provide our programs free to the public.

Obviously Birdathon is a very important event for us, and we are extremely grateful to the small number of enthusiastic birders who every year find sponsors, spend a day looking for birds, and then follow up by collecting and turning in the money. Our next objective is to broaden the participation by finding more birders who will get more sponsors, etc. So please consider doing a Birdathon this year, even if you feel that your birding skills are a little shaky. You'll have fun seeing what's out there, your skills will improve with practice, and you and your sponsors will have the satisfaction of contributing to a good cause.

To find out the particulars, read the Instructions to Birders in this [Otter Tracks](#) and call Judy Peterson 475-2620 to sign up and ask any questions. It's going to be fun, and we hope to have you out there with us!

Gardening with Wildlife

A number of brave and dedicated souls came out on a snowy March 16 evening to learn more about gardening with wildlife in mind. The second in a series dealing with gardening in harmony with wildlife, co-sponsored by the Middlebury Garden Club and Otter Creek Audubon Society, the evening included presentations by Sue Davis, Liz Webb and Jane Moulton, landscape specialists with Hepatica, and Jane Burton of the Garden Club. Participants were then given time to consult individually or peruse resources. A wintry March evening was the perfect time to plan for the shared delights of a garden alive with birds, frogs, toads, and butterflies!

The final meeting of this 3-part series will be a June visit to several area gardens as the summer action begins. For information call Heidi Willis at 388-9207.



Peregrine Plates

In 1995 the Vermont legislature passed a statute that provided for a conservation license plate. The plate, which carries the now-familiar image of a peregrine falcon, became available in 1997 and was slated to expire at the end of 2000 unless reauthorized by the general assembly.

The fee for this special plate is \$20. The first year \$10, half of your fee, goes to the Transportation Fund, \$5 goes to the Nongame Fund, and \$5 goes to the Watershed Management Fund. Renewal registration channels \$9 to each of these conservation funds. Through September 1999 7691 plates, 2 percent of current license plates, display the peregrine, less than the 3.8 percent estimated in marketing projections. They have generated \$273,316 for nongame wildlife and watershed conservation programs.

The task of the Nongame and Natural Heritage Program of the Dept. of Fish and Wildlife is to identify, monitor, manage and educate about Vermont's native species and all of its natural communities. This program's two most important sources of funds are the income tax check-off and the conservation license plate fund. Funds from taxes authorized by the state legislature do not find their way into this program. It depends entirely on voluntary contributions from those of us who appreciate its mission.

The state legislature is considering a proposal to extend the conservation license plate an additional five years. Passage seems assured. If you haven't invested in Vermont's natural heritage by ordering a peregrine plate, now is a good time.

Species in the Spotlight: Red Crossbill!

by Warren King

I've often said "You don't deserve to see a rare bird until you've identified a thousand common ones." We must have had our thousand common ones, because on January 2 a female red crossbill showed up at our feeder with a flock of common redpolls. The dark green unstreaked plumage, blackish wings and larger size, the size of a purple finch, set the bird apart from the smaller redpolls. We could see the crossed upper and lower mandibles clearly as the bird adeptly pried open the hulls of sunflower seeds at the feeder five feet from our kitchen window.

The crossbill returned daily to feed until February 20, when, to our surprise, a small flock of crossbills appeared at the feeder. Two had dark green female plumage, two had bright red male plumage, one was orange (presumably a second-year male), and one was red with black wings and white wing-bars, a male white-winged crossbill. Except for the orange bird which only came three days, this group returned daily until February 29. Thereafter one female red crossbill and the male white-winged crossbill appeared daily until March 21.

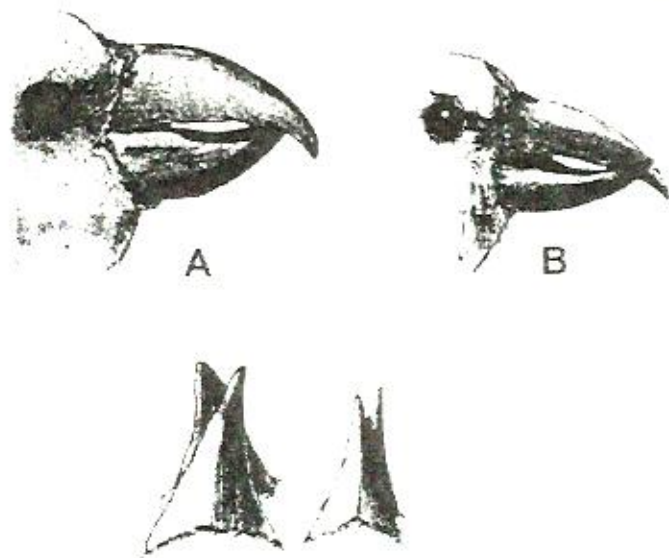
Crossbills are highly nomadic, traveling widely in search of crops of conifer cones. They extract cone seeds with their tongues after prying apart cone scales with their mandibles. They prefer green cones about to turn brown. Crossbills can take up to 3000 cone seeds per day, consuming up to 98 percent of the seeds available where they are foraging. To discourage crossbills and other cone eaters from inhibiting conifer regeneration, most conifers produce a heavy cone crop only every several years. When cones aren't available, crossbills turn to other seeds or insects. A rich cone crop can trigger crossbill nesting any season, even in winter.

Traditionally, four crossbill species have been recognized

worldwide. Parrot crossbills occur in Scandinavia and northern Russia. Scottish crossbills are found only in Scotland. White-winged crossbills occur across North America, northern Eurasia, and the mountains of Hispaniola. Red crossbills are distributed across northern North America and in the mountains to the Mexican highlands, Europe, Russia, China, islands in the Mediterranean, northern Africa, the Himalayas, and the Philippines.

Recent analysis of red crossbill vocalizations and bill and body measurements across North America have led to the astonishing conclusion that there are not one but eight North American red crossbill species, each giving quite distinct flight calls, excitement calls or alarm calls. Even though these populations are largely overlapping in distribution, they remain quite segregated and reproductively isolated. Types 1,2,3 and 4 can occur across northern North America, including Vermont. Types 5 and 7 occur only in the West. Type 8 is restricted to Newfoundland. The smallest, type 3, eats the small seeds of hemlock, spruce and larch cones. Type 1 attacks larger cones like those of the white pine. It may have been the most abundant type prior to cutting of white pine in the eastern U.S. a century ago. Type 6, from southern Arizona and the Sierra Madre of Mexico, has the largest bill and tackles the largest cones, but some pines in the West have cones too large for any of the crossbills. Further study of red crossbill populations elsewhere in the world are likely to reveal several additional species.

Crossbills don't experience irruptions of the sort that redpolls or pine siskins undergo some years. They are always considered rare birds in Addison County. The uniformly poor cone crop here has made crossbills dependent on feeders to an unusual extent this winter. We can't complain.



Red Crossbill bills: Size difference between populations.
Drawing by Dan Otte, *The Birds of N. America*.



Alternative Vehicle Show

Tired of high gas prices? Come check out and test drive cars of the future! Electric vehicles and the new hybrid gas-electric Honda Insight will be on display. Bring a valid driver's license to test drive the vehicles.

The show is free and open to everyone. It will be on Sunday April 9, 2000, 1-4 pm (note the date correction from the previous *Otter Tracks*) at Kirk Alumni Center parking lot on the campus of Middlebury College. Otter Creek Audubon Society and Middlebury College's EQ are cosponsoring the event. For more information, call Heather Karlson at 759-2998.

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Calendar of Events

The Ecology and Protection of Valley Clayplain Forests in Vermont: a conference on one of Vermont's rare natural community types: April 5, Wednesday, 9 am - 3:30 pm. Dead Creek Wildlife Management Office, Rte 17 in Addison. Please RSVP to Eric Sorenson at 241-3714 if attending. Bring a lunch. Sponsored by the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department in cooperation with Vermont Department of Forest, Parks, and Recreation, The Nature Conservancy, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Middlebury Area Land Trust, Vermont Family Forests, and the Champlain Valley Clayplain Forest Project.

Alternative-Fuel Vehicle Show: April 7, Sunday, 1-4 pm. Middlebury College Kirk Alumni Center, Route 30, Middlebury. Note change in time from February Otter Tracks. See article, this issue.

Field Trip: Ecology of Dead Creek and the Clayplain Forest: May 6, Saturday, 9 am-noon. Join botanist and ecologist Marc Lapin for a spring wildflower walk in the clayplain forest and learn more about this rare natural community. Meet at the goose viewing area on Rte. 17 in Addison. Cosponsored by the Otter Creek Audubon Society, the Middlebury Area Land Trust and the Champlain Valley Clayplain Forest Project. For more information call Heather Karlson at 759-2998.

Wild Open Tundra: Slide Presentation by Alan Coulter, and OCAS Annual Meeting: May 4, 7:30 pm. Downstairs at Ilsley Library, Middlebury.

Birdathon: May 20, Saturday. For details call Judy Peterson at 475-2620. See article, this issue.

Birdathon potluck: June 24, Saturday, 6 pm. Judy Peterson's house in Pantou. For directions call Judy at 475-2620.

Otter Tracks

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