Otter Creek Audubon Society

September 2012

Otter Tracks

Inside

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

Otter Creek Audubon Society
PO Box 938
Middlebury, VT 05753
Barbara Otsuka, President
Warren King, Editor
388-4082
Winslow Colwell, Design and Layout
www.wcolwell.com

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Eleventh Annual Dead Creek Wildlife Day

Saturday, October 6, 2012

Clear the decks on Saturday, October 6th. It's time for Dead Creek Wildlife Day. This family-oriented daylong celebration of the remarkable wildlife of the Champlain Valley combines fun events for youngsters with nature walks, informative presentations by Vermont's most capable biologists, natural historians and sportsmen. Build a bluebird nest box with your child, carve a wooden decoy or a soap sculpture, learn to recognize and control Vermont's invasive exotic plants, navigate with a GPS unit, watch retrievers in action, help band birds or mark butterflies, see live Vermont animals up close, see what owls eat by taking apart an owl pellet, and many more activities. Featured this year are presentations on Vermont's turtles, grassland birds, Black Terns, and bats. Lend a hand at The Big Sit, attempting to see 50 or more bird species from a 17-foot circle through the day.

The action starts at 7 AM with bird banding at the Route 17 Dead Creek crossing boat launch. From 10 AM on, multiple events take place through the day until 4 PM. The Addison School PTA provides a healthy lunch at reasonable prices.

The Dead Creek Wildlife Management Area headquarters, on Route 17 one mile west of Route 22A in Addison, is the site of most presentations. Continuous free shuttle bus service runs from the headquarters to the starting location of field events and back through the day. The enclosed schedule of events will help you plan your day so you don't miss events important to you, your family or friends.

Membership Renewal Information

To help you with membership renewal we have highlighted the due date on your label.

It's handy to renew over the phone at the National Audubon membership center:

800/274-4201

Please check the "Join Us" tab on our webpage:

ottercreekaudubon.org

We've prepared a membership FAQ, listing questions we often hear from OCAS members. If your label doesn't have an expiration date, it means we are sending it as a gift. Please check the FAQ.

State of the World's Birds 2012

Review and Editorial by Warren King

VIEWPOINT

BirdLife International, the preeminent and oldest international conservation organization focusing on birds and their habitats, issued a major report entitled *State of the World's Birds* in 2004. Among many other conservation activities BirdLife International compiles the *Birds Red Data Book* and related lists for the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). BirdLife operates through a global network of 117 national partners. Its U.S. partner is National Audubon.

This summer BirdLife released the third *State of the World's Birds*. The picture it paints is of a continuing, perhaps accelerating, global decline in the status of the world's birds. The report is accessible at www.birdlife.org/datazone/sowb. This is a website that was carefully planned and with considerable substance.

State of the World's Birds is organized into four sections -- Introduction: the importance of birds and biodiversity; State: the changing state of birds; Pressure: why birds are declining; and Response: what can be done about it. Within each section are four to ten themes.

As an example, one theme in the Introduction section deals with the role played by Important Bird Areas (IBAs), a global Birdlife program for prioritizing the conservation of bird species. Within the IBA theme page are five key messages, each of which offers several case studies. This organizational framework allows the viewer to focus as broadly or narrowly as desired. Dramatic photos, charts, graphs, tables and maps are present at all levels of the report. A number of national partners, including National Audubon, have produced national *State of the Birds* reports. Audubon has collaborated with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to produce annual *State of the Birds* reports since 2009 (see Otter Tracks May 2010 issue for a review of the U.S. 2010 report). The most recent U.S. report, 2011, is available at http://birds.audubon.org/state-birds.

In a nutshell, of the 10,000 species of birds worldwide, 151 have become extinct in the wild since 1500. Nineteen of these extinctions occurred in the last quarter of the 20th century. Four species extinct in the wild have captive populations still extant. Three more species have been lost in this century thusfar, two of which, Hawaiian Crow and Po'ouli were U.S. species. As of 2011 1253 species (12.5 percent of the total, or 1 in 8) are globally threatened. Of these, 189 are critically endangered ("extremely high risk of extinction in the immediate future").

Threatened birds are found throughout the world. In the past most extinctions occurred on oceanic islands, where many small isolated vulnerable populations were wiped out by predators or pathogens introduced by humans. Today the threat to birds, while still present on islands, is now shifting increasingly to continental areas. Hotspots of threat include forests of the Andes and Brazilian Atlantic forest.

The regional trend in threat status is toward Asia, especially Borneo and Sumatra, where destruction of forests rich in bird species has been rampant and widespread. Additionally, open-ocean seabirds of a number of species have experienced major declines with the recent expansion of commercial longline fisheries and the continuing predation threat on nesting islands.

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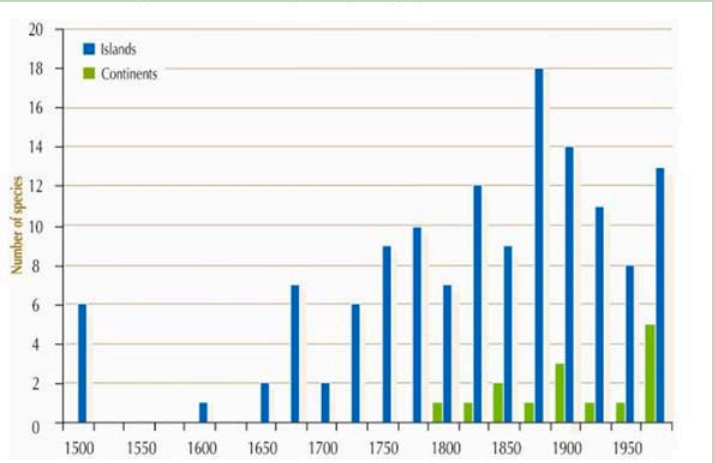
Number of Bird Species Extinctions per 25 years, by Islands and Contintents



Totals include bird species classified as Extinct, Extinct in the Wild, Critically Endangered (Possibly Extinct) and Critically Endangered (Possibly Extinct in the Wild). Analysis of data held in BirdLife's World Bird Database (2008).

State of the World's Birds

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For example, most albatross species are experiencing long-term steady declines due to continuing pressure from longline fishing.

The status of 225 bird species in the IUCN List of Threatened Species was moved to a higher category of threat between 1988 and 2008, while 32 species were downlisted. Eighty percent of threatened species are declining in population, whereas nine percent are stable and just five percent increased. The direction of movement of the remaining three percent is unclear.

In the U.S., as well as in other parts of the world, a substantial number of "common" bird species, while not yet on threatened lists nationally or globally, are extremely worrisome because of continuing population decline over the past 40 years. Examples among U.S. species include Evening Grosbeak, which has declined 91 percent in 40 years, Greater Scaup 75 percent, Loggerhead Shrike 72 percent, Whippoorwill 57 percent, Common Grackle 61 percent, Eastern Meadowlark 73 percent and Field Sparrow 62 percent. Some individuals of all of these examples occur in Vermont for part of their lives. If you think that some birds you were familiar with growing up are no longer as common, you're probably right.

The report gives considerable attention to human-induced pressures on bird populations. These pressures include alien species, disease, forest loss, infrastructure development from an ever-expanding human population, pollution, and overexploitation, including from commercial fisheries. BirdLife singles out agriculture as destroying or degrading more bird habitat than any other factor globally. Climate change, while clearly already affecting bird distribution, is likely to pose the greatest challenge to birds in the future, according to the report.

Responses to these manifold overwhelming threats seem meager, almost futile. They include sound environmental governance, more funding for conservation, linking biodiversity with livelihoods and well-being, increasing the size of conservation constituencies, and working to conserve birds and biodiversity at wider landscape and seascape levels.

This report provides a comprehensive picture of avian decline, and it's not pretty. Birds are the best known group of organisms. They have long been looked to as indicators of more widespread habitat health. Their decline shows that we are chipping our way through the ecological foundation of our future on the globe. There is no assurance the decline of birds, other organisms, and all of our other life support systems will decline linearly. We are, in fact, likely to have global surprises ahead that may take place in decades or even years, not the steady, predictable millennial shifts we're used to. This is not the heritage our children expect from us.

A Spotted Sandpiper Takes a Swim

By Ron Payne

You might think seeing my first Whimbrel would qualify as my best bird sighting of the day, but that was not the case on a sunny late August day in 2010 at the Stone Bridge access of the Dead Creek Wildlife Management Area in Addison. In the excitement of getting a life bird I had accidentally knocked one of the rubber feet off the tripod of my spotting scope. As I was fruitlessly searching for it in the grass, out of the corner of my eye I saw a fairly large bird headed very quickly in my direction. It was an immature Cooper's Hawk bearing down at a low angle toward the small bridge over the dam. I was amazed to see the hawk actually fly through the narrow gap between the bridge and the dam and heard a frantic twittering commotion on the other side of the causeway after it went out of sight. I crept forward to see what had happened and saw the hawk perched on a lower branch looking down at the water at a swimming Spotted Sandpiper.

To call what the sandpiper was doing "swimming" is a bit of an exaggeration. Though I could see its legs were furiously pumping away underwater, the forward progress it was making could only have been measured in feet per hour. The Cooper's Hawk, seeing an essentially stationary target, decided to make another attempt to catch the sandpiper, sallying from its perch towards it. I assumed that the poor sandpiper was doomed at this point, but it surprised both me and the hawk by diving underwater to evade the attack. The sandpiper stayed down for a couple of seconds before popping back up to the surface like a cork where it resumed "peeping" and kicking its legs. The Cooper's Hawk had returned to the same perch and wasn't ready to give up yet. It tried its luck one more time, but the results were exactly the same with the sandpiper diving to escape its talons. At this point the Cooper's Hawk must have realized its persistence wasn't going to pay off and flew away in frustration.

With the immediate threat to its life over, the Spotted Sandpiper still had to

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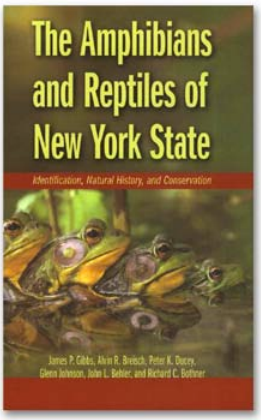
Exotic Earthworms Reduce Ground-nesting Songbird Abundance

The last glaciation removed earthworms from northern North America. Earthworms now found north of Pennsylvania and New Jersey, the glaciers' southern limit, were introduced from Europe or Asia. These exotic earthworms are increasing in distribution and abundance throughout northern forests when earthworm fishing bait is dumped, and where they or their egg sacs are carried on the undercarriage or tire treads of cars, trucks and logging equipment. They aerate the soil, but they have many adverse impacts on forests. They speed decomposition of leaf litter, increase soil density, promote mixing of soil horizons and decrease soil carbon and nitrogen, allowing some nutrients to drop beneath where plants can utilize them. They have been shown to reduce mycorrhizal fungi, crucial to plant vigor, and the abundance of soil invertebrates, ground layer plants, and some salamander populations.

Studies conducted in national forests in Michigan and Wisconsin between 2008 and 2010 show that earthworms are responsible for reducing leaf litter depth in maple-basswood forests. Sites without earthworms had statistically significant greater abundance of Ovenbirds and Hermit Thrushes than sites similar except for the presence of earthworms. The studies found that leaf litter reduction encouraged sedge-dominated ground cover to replace herbaceous plants. Ovenbird nest density and survival of offspring decreased directly with loss of leaf litter. The researchers speculate that sedge carpets conceal Ovenbird nests less well and reduce availability of invertebrate populations. Lowered Ovenbird food availability reduces nest attentiveness and increases predation rates. The researchers' data indicate a "significant adverse effect of earthworms to ground-dwelling songbirds." They recommend widespread adoption of stringent measures to prevent further spread of earthworms in northern forests.



Book Review:

The Amphibians and Reptiles of New York State

Identification, Natural History, and Conservation

by James P. Gibbs, Alvin R. Breisch, Peter K. Ducey, Glenn Johnson, John L. Behler, and Richard C. Bothner

Oxford University Press, 2007

Review by Jim Andrews

I require one book of my UVM herpetology students and it is this one. This book is written by a who's who of distinguished herpetologists from New York State who have a wealth of experience with local reptiles, amphibians, and their conservation. All the herptiles found in the New England states plus a few more-southern species are included. In addition to detailed identification information, color photographs, and New York range maps, this guide includes details on natural history, habitat, local status and distribution (in New York), and a section titled "Other Intriguing Facts" for each species. The final 165 pages include very informative chapters titled Threats, Legal Protections, Habitat Conservation Guidelines, Conservation Case Studies, Finding and Studying Amphibians and Reptiles, and Folklore. This guide serves as the perfect complement to the Vermont species list, Vermont distribution maps, and Vermont status information found on-line at the Vermont Reptile and Amphibian Atlas (VTHerpAtlas.org).

Birds Applaud FAA Tower Research

The May 2008 issue of *Otter Tracks* reported that a federal appeals court ruled in 2007 in a suit brought by EarthJustice on behalf of a coalition of environmental organizations including American Bird Conservancy and National Audubon Society that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), the agency that licenses towers, "must carefully consider possible adverse effects on migratory bird populations. The FCC must also involve the public in the tower approval process."

Requested by the FCC, research by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) on tower lighting and its impacts on birds began in 2009. The study found that flashing side marker lights were acceptable for "small towers" up to 350 feet high, but they could be eliminated on tall towers, some of which reach 2000 feet, as long as the bright lights at the towers' top were flashing. The optimum speed of flashing was 27 to 33 flashes per minute. Slower rates of flashing reduced towers' visibility to pilots. Faster rates caused unacceptable bird mortality. LED light fixtures, with their instantaneous on-off properties, were recommended over incandescent bulbs. They were more readily located by pilots, less attractive to birds, and less expensive. The FAA's recommendations would eliminate continuously operating red lights, which cause the most serious bird mortality, in favor of flashing red lights or none at all.

This proposal comes after a decade of persistent advocacy by environmental organizations, especially the American Bird Conservancy, which led the charge from the outset. Information was not available on the length of time needed to retrofit all old towers and towers under construction.

OCAS Calendar of Events
September – December 2012

Sunday, September 16
11 AM – 2 PM

Hawk Watch at Buck Mountain, Waltham. Hawks should be at peak numbers. Meet at 11 AM at Vergennes park and ride, junction of Routes 22A and 7, Vergennes. Joint outing with Green Mountain Audubon, led by Ron Payne, Warren King and Bruce MacPherson. Call Warren King, 388-4082, for more information or if in doubt about the weather.

Saturday, October 6
9:30 AM – 4 PM

Dead Creek Wildlife Day. Celebrate wildlife in the Champlain Valley at a daylong series of events at Dead Creek Wildlife Management Area headquarters, Route 17, one mile west of Route 22A in Addison. See bird banding and butterfly marking, take a beginners' bird walk, learn about Vermont's turtles, see live animals close up, take morning or afternoon nature walks. Call 802-241-3700 for information. See article and schedule of events this issue.

Thursday, November 8
5:30 – 8:30 PM

OCAS Annual Dinner and Meeting. Reservations needed for dinner at 6. No fee for talk at 7:15. Dinner this year will be at the American Legion at 49 Wilson Rd. off Boardman St. behind G.Stone Motors south of Middlebury on Route 7. Call Sue Rasmussen at 897-5411 for reservations. OCAS members will receive a separate invitation by mail.

Saturday, December 15

Ferrisburgh Christmas Bird Count. Call Mike Winslow at 877-6586 for details.

Saturday, December 15

Mt. Abe Christmas Bird Count. Call Randy or Cathy Durand at 453-4370 for details.

Sunday, December 16,

Middlebury Christmas Bird Count. Call Jim or Kris Andrews at 352-4734 for details.

Saturday, December 29

Hinesburg Christmas Bird Count. Call Paul Wieczorek at 802-434-4216 for details.

Annual Bird Seed Sale

During the first two weeks of October Agway will have bird seed sale order forms available at their Middlebury store on Exchange Street. Request the special Audubon order forms to get special Audubon prices during the first two weeks of October. Pickup will be later in October.

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, September 8, 8 – 10 AM
Leader: Ron Payne

Thursday, October 11, 8 – 10 AM
Leader: Warren and Barry King

Saturday, November 10, 8 – 10 AM
Leader to be announced

Thursday, December 13, 8 – 10 AM
Leader to be announced

Swimming Sandpiper

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manage to find its way out of the water. I watched it continue swimming for several more minutes. It seemingly made no headway at all toward a stand of cattails just a short fifteen feet away. I was beginning to wonder if it would ever be able to extract itself when it suddenly started flapping its wings. After a brief struggle, it managed to jerk itself out of the water and fly down river, still giving that constant "peeping" call as if to complain to the world about the horrible experience it had just been through.

Audubon-VELCO Collaboration

A creative collaboration between Audubon Vermont and the Vermont Electric Power Company (VELCO) called the Champlain Valley Power Line Survey Project, took place in June 2012. Audubon Vermont, with VELCO's authorization and guidance, organized 30 volunteers into teams of 2 or 3 observers each from Rutland County Audubon, Otter Creek Audubon and Green Mountain Audubon chapters to survey VELCO's power line from West Rutland to Burlington for the presence or absence of shrubland birds along VELCO's right-of-way. Initial checks, both on the ground and from the air, by Audubon Vermont's Mark LaBarr and Margaret Fowle, the project's coordinators, suggested that the power line right-of-way contained substantial habitat suitable for shrubland species. Shrubland habitat has declined significantly throughout Vermont. The Audubon observer teams scoured each section, which ranged in length from a half mile to over two miles. The teams surveyed 31 of the 34 sections, an area of 865 acres. Target shrubland bird species observed included 9 Golden-winged Warblers, 14 Blue-winged Warblers, 62 Eastern Towhees, 9 Brown Thrashers, 19 Prairie Warblers, 66 Field Sparrows and one American Woodcock. A Sedge Wren, rare in Vermont, was an added bonus.

Monitoring VELCO shrublands **Photo by Carol Ramsayer**

Follow-up action will:

- Make a map of shrubland bird locations
- Recommend to VELCO management practices that benefit shrubland birds
- Work with a UVM graduate student to analyze the vegetative structure in areas with and without target birds
- Encourage right-of-way landowners to enroll in programs of the National Resource Conservation Service that promote bird habitat management
- Plan extending the project in 2013 to Grand Isle or Franklin counties

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