



Otter Creek Audubon Society

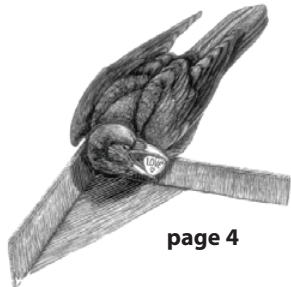
May  
2013

# Otter Tracks

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## Audubon Vermont: Wings Across America Award



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### 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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Audubon Vermont's Forest Bird Initiative received a 2013 U.S. Forest Service *Wings Across America* Award in recognition of its Foresters for the Birds Project, carried out in partnership with the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation. A two-year grant from the U.S. Forest Service initiated the project. The project designs and provides tools and training that foresters use to help private landowners integrate timber management with neotropical migratory bird habitat conservation. Jim Shallow, Audubon Vermont's acting co-executive director, received the award's prize at the 2013 North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference in Arlington, Virginia. The prize will be on display at the Green Mountain Audubon Center in Huntington.

Over one hundred foresters, including all of Vermont's county foresters, are participating in Foresters for the Birds. Collectively, these foresters manage over one million acres of private forestland in Vermont. Foresters for the Birds includes development and distribution of a four-part toolkit:

-  "Birds with Silviculture in Mind: Birder's Dozen Pocket Guide for Vermont Foresters"
-  "Silviculture with Birds in Mind: Options for Vermont Foresters"
-  "Guide for Incorporating Bird Habitat Data into a Forest Inventory"
-  "Songs of the Forest" CD of forest breeding bird songs 

## Japanese Barberry and Lyme Disease

By Ron Payne



You may have heard of Japanese barberry, an invasive shrub that was recently added to the Vermont Noxious Weed Quarantine list and banned for sale at nurseries. But what you may not have heard about is the role of Japanese barberry in the spread of Lyme disease.

The nymphs of the deer tick, the carrier of the bacteria that causes Lyme disease, need high humidity to survive, and can dry out and die when humidity gets down to just 80 percent. But the dense growth of stems at the base of a

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## Bird Mortality from Cats

Review and  
Editorial by  
Warren King



# VIEWPOINT

**R**esearchers from the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reviewed 170 cat predation studies from across the country in 2013. In the peer-reviewed on-line journal Nature Communications they estimated that cats in the U.S. kill between 1.4 billion and 3.7 billion birds annually, with a median figure of 2.4 billion. Previous but less comprehensive estimates of bird mortality from cat predation suggested a figure of 530 million. About 31 percent of this mortality was from pet cats; the remaining 69 percent was attributable to unowned cats.

The significance of these new figures lies in their comparison with other nationwide causes of human-induced bird mortality. One published estimate is that collisions with buildings caused the greatest number of deaths, 900 million, followed by cats at 510 million, high tension wires at 180 million, pesticides at 80 million, vehicle impacts at 70 million, communications at 60 million, and hunting at 20 million. Wind turbines, currently under intense scrutiny for their impacts on our landscape, account for one million bird deaths annually, not an insignificant figure but only a small fraction of the bird deaths due to cat mortality. The new figures suggest that cats account for more human-related bird deaths than all other sources of mortality combined.

The only way that cat owners can be sure their cats are not contributing to the bird mortality figure is to keep them inside. Cats kept inside live longer and healthier lives. Studies have shown that cat predation is reducing bird populations of some species in some areas. Greater precision of the impact of cats is not warranted at present because of uncertainties about the size of most bird populations:🐾



**Cat with American Coot** photo by Debi Shearwater

## An Eagle and a Coot on Florida Bay

By Dottie Nelson

**O**n a recent trip to the Florida Keys my husband and I visited the Florida Keys Wild Bird Center in Tavernier where they care for injured wild birds, releasing them once they've recovered or providing a safe haven if they are unable to be released. Soon, with the help of a local fishing boat captain with a big net, we had brought them a seagull with a broken wing that had been hanging around our resort.

The next day my husband hired a fishing guide to take him out onto Florida Bay. I went along to take pictures of Eric reeling in the lunkers and do some bird watching. About an hour into the trip as we were stopped in the middle of the Bay I noticed two eagles overhead. I said, "Look! One of them has a fish!" Eric said, "No. It's caught a bird!" Just as he said it the eagle dropped the bird. It splashed into the water 50 yards from our boat. Immediately the eagle dived to retrieve it but the bird dived under the water and

got away. The eagle rose and dived again but again the bird dived. This happened 3 more times. We didn't know which one to root for! The eagle needed to eat. The bird didn't want to be dinner!

Eventually the eagle gave up and flew off. We could not believe what happened next! The bird, a coot, began paddling toward us. We watched, amazed, as it swam in a straight line until it was inches from our boat and looked up at us! There really was only one choice. The guide scooped it into his net and brought it onboard. It had a bad gash on its leg from the eagle. I still had the Wild Bird Center number on my cell phone from the day before. "Hello. It's us...the people who brought you the seagull yesterday. Today we have a coot that fell from the sky!" As soon as we landed we brought it to the Center. We were very grateful to the people there for the wonderful work they are doing! 🐾

# OCAS Education Grants at Work

By Carol Ramsayer

In Addison County schools, many teachers are busy planning a rich variety of outdoor learning opportunities for their classes. Teachers in four schools are recipients of the OCAS 2013 Education Grants. The funds, awarded in February, will provide their students with fun outdoor experiences designed to deepen their understanding of the natural world.

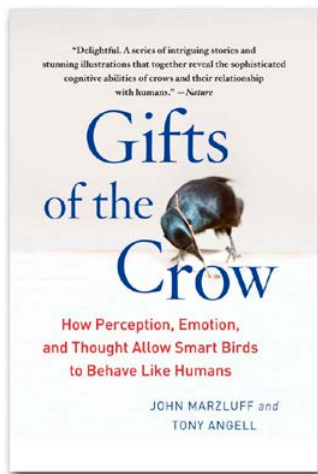
In Cornwall School, the fifth grade class will participate in the Maritime Museum's On-water Ecology program on Lake Champlain. From their canoes the students will take water samples, test turbidity, and net fish. Back at the museum, they will then test the water and examine it under microscopes for plankton. Through this hands-on experience, students will gain a clearer perspective on issues of pollution and the interdependence of ecosystems.

In September the 5<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> graders at Orwell Village School will again begin their school year with Environmental Science Days, a 2-day exploration at Camp Sunrise. In a beautiful forested setting students rotate through ten stations designed to encourage curiosity about nature. Many station presenters are professional environmentalists. OCAS has supported this highly successful program before, and participated by co-leading a nature walk last year. It was clear that the OVS students were fully engaged in learning through this exceptional outdoor experience.

Weybridge Elementary plans to explore habitats around the school, as well as a beaver pond system near Snake Mountain. On their class hikes they will use OCAS binoculars to make observations and develop questions, leading to a deeper understanding of these neighboring ecosystems.

At Mt. Abraham Union Middle/High School, the seventh grade science teacher has created an exciting citizen science opportunity for her students. They will travel by bus to the Watershed Center near Bristol, then spend the day in small groups exploring four habitats there – pond, forest, meadow and vernal pool. The grant money in this case will be used to fund the bus and purchase tools for their nature study. Field books, collecting nets, and specimen jars have been purchased by OCAS, and will be available for future groups to borrow. The students will take photographs and then submit all their sightings to the Vermont Center for Ecostudies to be included in the Atlas of Vermont Life.

OCAS applauds these four recipients of this year's Education Grants, and thanks them for their commitment to bringing nature into the lives of Addison County youth. We are excited to be able to offer these grants, but it is these dedicated teachers who, through their time and talents, put in the extra work to make it all come together. We thank them! 🐾



## Book Review: Gifts of the Crow

By John Marzluff and  
Tony Angell

213 pages  
Atria Books, 2013

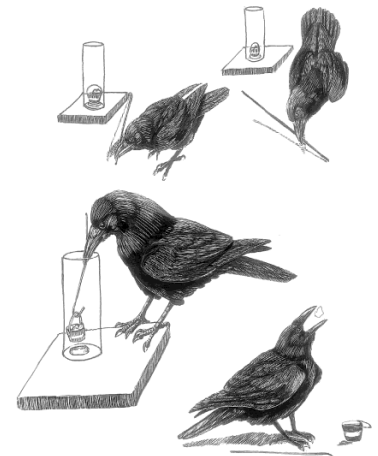
Review by  
Sue Rasmussen

The word “crow” conjures up mostly negative images to some people: loud, raucous, nuisance, crop destroyers, scavengers, and mischief makers. When you read *Gifts*

*of the Crow*, you may come away with a different perception of these birds. In combining science, observational studies and citizen report, John Marzluff and Tony Angell give us a glimpse into the lives and ways of the raven and crow. By comparing the evolution, structure and physiology of the corvid brain to those of humans, they show us how learning takes place and how we share similar traits. Crows and ravens have a large brain in comparison to body size and have an extended juvenile period where they learn through play and interaction with their envi-

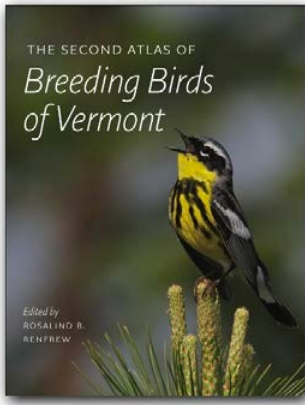
ronment, as well as from their parents and peers. These birds are intelligent, mate for life, and live in close association with their relatives for many years. They show awareness of individual human faces and cars and relate to us based on how we have treated them. They think, dream and problem solve; design and use tools; use planning and insight in meeting their needs; work together to achieve goals; take risks, play, mourn, and murder their own.

For thousands of years we've shared an ongoing and close association with the raven and crow. They're in our myths and legends, music, art and language. This relationship will likely continue since they are very successful in adapting to our changing human society. The author suggests that we may eliminate some of the problems we have with these birds by modifying our own behavior. *Gifts of the Crow* has given me new understanding and respect for the lives of the corvids. It is well worth the read. 🐾



**Betty the New Caledonian Crow  
makes a tool to retrieve food.**  
Illustration by Toni Angell





**Book Review:**  
**The Second Atlas of Breeding Birds of Vermont**  
**Edited by Rosalind Renfrew**  
**University Press of New England, 2013**  
**548 pages, 6 lbs., \$75**  
**Review by Warren King**

**T**he Vermont Center for Ecostudies undertook The Second Atlas of Breeding Birds of Vermont in partnership with the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department and in cooperation with a number of agencies and organizations across the state, including Audubon Vermont and Otter Creek Audubon. Volunteers conducted fieldwork between 2003 and 2007. This volume follows the pattern set by the first atlas, which took its inspiration from a Massachusetts atlas then in progress. The first atlas, with fieldwork from 1976 to 1981, was published in 1985. The intent of these volumes is to provide a clear perspective on the distribution of birds breeding in Vermont and to compare changes in distribution after the passage of a quarter century. Although Vermont was the first state to complete a breeding bird atlas, similar work has been undertaken on a first and second generation atlas in Ontario, New York and Maryland.

The effort that went into this volume was prodigious. The first atlas was assembled from the researches of 200 volunteer observers who carefully monitored 179 5 km-by-5 km blocks, one block randomly selected from each 1:25,000 topographic map across the state. The second atlas took advantage of a larger bird-savvy population; 320 volunteers committed over 30,000 hours to monitor the original 179 blocks plus an additional 186 blocks, a full third of the state. The survey methods were held constant between atlases to facilitate atlas-to-atlas comparisons.

Chapter 1 lays out in detail the plan for the atlas and compares gains and losses of occupied blocks between atlases. Chapter 1 also assesses which species decreased or increased in terms of the number and distribution of occupied blocks.



**Bobolink**

Attempting to quantify numbers of breeding pairs of each species in each block would have provided a clearer picture but was simply too demanding logistically. Four species recorded in the first atlas were not found in the second atlas. Fourteen species recorded in the second atlas were not found in the first atlas.

Chapter 2 discusses the biogeography of Vermont, and more specifically how Vermont's geography affects the distribution of 202 bird species that breed in the state.

Chapter 3 deals with bird conservation in Vermont, both historically and into the future. The primary issues are habitat loss and fragmentation, climate change, and exotic plants, insects and pathogens.

The bulk of the volume, and bulk is the correct word, comprises species accounts, two pages per species. One page provides a text summary of each species' distribution, breeding and feeding habits, changes from the first atlas and conservation status. The second page provides two maps, each with a background of the state's eight biophysical regions and county boundaries, and showing the blocks occupied by each species in atlases 1 and 2 as well as tables of the number of occupied blocks in atlas 1 and atlas 2, the percent of each species' occupied blocks that lie within each biophysical region, and the number of blocks within which the species was confirmed breeding, probably, or possibly breeding, or just observed. A superb photographic color portrait of each species provides an added touch of class.

At \$13 per pound this book costs no more per pound than prime filet mignon or a bottle of fine wine. And it will provide an encyclopedic perspective of the distribution of Vermont's breeding birds for the next quarter century, when the next atlas may appear, but probably not in a hard-bound form. Thanks and applause are due to the Vermont Center for Ecostudies and the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department, editor Roz Renfrew, the several chapter and species account authors, and the many volunteers who observed and compiled the information in this magnificent volume. For those unable to afford the hard-bound book, and for those pursuing active bird distribution research, the Vermont Breeding Bird Atlas website ([www.vtecostudies.org/vbba/](http://www.vtecostudies.org/vbba/)) offers virtually all the information in the book plus an additional interactive component for those wanting to dig deeper into the data. Nothing speaks more clearly that this book is a labor of love than the generosity of the project leaders in offering the information at no cost on line in spite of a need to sell copies of the book to cover expenses. 🐾

## Japanese Barberry and Ticks

continued from page 1

Japanese barberry shrub provides a humid oasis for these young ticks, sometimes staying at 100 percent humidity when the surrounding area becomes inhospitable for them. This allows deer ticks to survive in

greater numbers than would have been otherwise possible.

A University of Connecticut study found an average of 122 Lyme disease carrying deer ticks per acre in areas that were overrun by Japanese barberry. In areas where they had actively controlled the spread of the barberry, they found 30 Lyme disease

carrying ticks per acre. And in areas without the presence of any Japanese barberry, they found just 10 Lyme disease carrying ticks per acre. So control of Japanese barberry shouldn't be treated as just a conservation issue, it should be treated as a public health issue as well. 🐾

## OCAS Calendar of Events May – September 2013

**SUNDAY, MAY 12**  
**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 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.

**TUESDAY, MAY 7**  
**THROUGH**  
**TUESDAY, MAY 21**  
**OCAS BIRDATHON.** Our main fundraiser of the year. OCAS teams identify as many species as they can under self-imposed rules in a 24-hour period. Supporters provide contributions per species or a lump-sum amount. See insert, this issue.

**SUNDAY, JUNE 9**  
**6 AM-NOON**  
**BIRDING ADVENTURE TO WEST RUTLAND MARSH.** Meet at Middlebury Beef at 6 AM to carpool to West Rutland Marsh, an Audubon Important Bird Area with diverse habitats, or join us at the West Rutland Price Chopper parking lot at 7 AM. Rutland County Audubon will lead us on this special walk on roads around the 3.7-mile loop. Half the loop is a shorter option. See article in this issue. Call Carol at 989-7115 for information.

### Let's Go Birding! by Carol Ramsayer

**H**ave you ever tramped through Vermont's lush woods and wondered, "What bird's singing that beautiful song?" Or admired an industrious woodpecker and wished you knew which species it was? Well, here is your chance to ask all your questions and enjoy one of Middlebury's natural treasures at the same time! On Saturday, June 15<sup>th</sup>, OCAS and Middlebury Area Land Trust (MALT) are offering a birding walk for beginners of all ages. Experienced birders will lead the walk along the Quest Trail, a spur off the Wright Park section of the Trail Around Middlebury. The route visits a variety of habitats: piney woods, a managed shrubland, a beaver habitat, the banks of Otter Creek, and a mixed hardwood forest. We will listen for birdsong, watch for nesting behaviors and enjoy whatever natural wonders come our way. There will even be a surprise snack stop!

Bring your binoculars, or borrow a pair from OCAS. The walk is family-friendly, but not appropriate for baby strollers. We will meet at 9:00 AM at the Wright Park parking lot north of Pulp Mill Covered Bridge on Seymour St. Extension. The walk ends by about 11:00 AM. We will go rain or shine, but if you have questions call 989-7115. 🐾



### MARSH, MEADOW AND GRASSLAND WILDLIFE WALKS

A monthly joint OCAS-MALT event. We invite community members to help 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. Beginning birders are welcome. Come for all or part of the walk. For information call 388-1007 or 388-6829. Note: from May through August the walks will start at 7, not 8.

**SATURDAY, MAY 11, 7 – 9 AM**  
Leader: Gary and Kathy Starr

**THURSDAY, JUNE 13, 7 – 9 AM**  
Leader: Barb Otsuka

**SATURDAY, JULY 13, 7 – 9 AM**  
Leader: Ron Payne

**THURSDAY, AUGUST 8, 7 – 9 AM**  
Leader: Craig Zondag

**SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 14, 8 – 10 AM**  
Leader: To be announced

### Birding Adventure to W. Rutland Marsh by Carol Ramsayer

**S**ummer is here, and with it the promise of woods and wetlands filled with birdsong and flashes of color. If all this avian activity has you yearning to find a new place to bird, here is an opportunity for you! Rutland County Audubon Society has invited us to join them for a morning exploration at West Rutland Marsh. RCAS holds monthly monitoring walks at this Important Bird Area, but on Sunday, June 9<sup>th</sup>, they have invited OCAS members for a special walk. The route is on roads the whole way, and takes in woods and brushland as well as protected wetlands. We'll enjoy the good company of local experts, a chance to find many of the 145 recorded species and hopefully have a glimpse of baby Virginia Rails. All birding levels welcome! Meet at Middlebury Beef south of Middlebury on Rt. 7 between Routes 125 and 116 at 6:00 AM to carpool to the West Rutland Price Chopper parking lot. We will return to Middlebury Beef by noon. Or, join us at the Price Chopper at 7:00 AM. The route is a 3.7-mile loop, with the option of going half way. Questions? Call Carol at 989-7115. 🐾

### The Blackbird Who Hates Me

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Last year the blackbirds moved their nest to a different location further up the boardwalk. Closer to a stand of trees, instead of taking flight to run me off, the male was content to just scold me from the branches above as I passed. As for this year, Red-winged Blackbirds have already returned to the marsh and have begun setting up their territories. So I wait with interest to see if my inadvertent foe is among them, waiting to again express its displeasure with me. 🐾

# The Blackbird Who Hates Me

by Ron Payne

On warm summer evenings I have the habit of taking walks along the boardwalk at Otter View Park in Middlebury to watch the sunset and enjoy the peaceful sounds of nature as the world winds down for the night. But starting in late June of 2010 that peacefulness was disturbed by a being who vigorously and noisily objected to my presence there. It was a male Red-wing Blackbird that would repeatedly zoom back and forth above my head, squealing and squawking in protest as I traversed a 100-foot section of the boardwalk.

This happened to me each time I walked there throughout the twenty or so days of its nesting cycle. His harassment always started in the same spot and only began after his mate made an audible complaint from her nest hidden in the nearby cattails. At first I didn't mind, as I was certainly the interloper on their territory, and a big animal like me could easily be seen by them as a threat. But then I noticed something interesting. Once as I watched from the end of the boardwalk, having already received my abuse from the bird, someone else walked through its territory completely unmolested. This blackbird was being selective at whom it took umbrage.

Some people who visited the park knew the bird well, having had the same experience as me, while others knew nothing about it. One woman who regularly passed it without notice suggested it might be my hat it didn't like, but removing it before walking past

didn't make the bird like me any better. In general, the criteria for which people it chose to berate were a mystery, but certain patterns were easy to see. It always objected to joggers and anyone walking a dog, but it paid no attention to children.

Once the chicks fledged from the nest and the blackbird was no longer tied to the area, things went back to normal and my walks became quieter again. That is, until the next spring and nesting season when the blackbird returned and treated me in exactly the same manner.

Several studies have been done on crows and pigeons in recent years showing their ability to recognize individual people, but none that I know of have been done with Red-winged Blackbirds. So I can't say with any certainty that it knew my face and thought of me as a distinct adversary. Maybe it was another factor such as my height or behavior that set it off, but you'll have to forgive me if I take it a little personally after being chastised by it for two straight summers.

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