



Otter Creek Audubon Society

February
2014

Otter Tracks

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The Great Backyard Bird Count

February 14th-17th
2014



American Robin by 2013 GBBC Participant Gwen Starrett

The 2014 Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) takes place Friday, February 14, through Monday, February 17. Last year for the first time GBBC joined up with eBird to provide global coverage. The results show a massive increase in participation. Checklists submitted rose from 104,285 in Canada and the U.S. to 134,935 from 110 countries. Species identified jumped from 623 to 3610, more than one of every three species worldwide. Individual birds counted doubled from 17 million to 34 million. The single largest flock reported was of 5 million Red-winged Blackbirds with 1.5 million American Robins from St. Joseph, Missouri.

It's easy to participate in the GBBC by making your observations and then submitting your list. **Before you submit a list you must create a free GBBC account.** You will no longer be able to mail in your observations. Go to www.birdsource.org and click on How to Participate. You'll find downloadable instructions on creating your free account, on entering your 2014 observations, and on learning about the opportunities available to you with this new arrangement. If you are already registered with eBird, you can use the same login information. Count the birds in your backyard, your

favorite birding spot, even traveling. Use the convenient tally sheet inserted in this issue, but remember that you need to create your GBBC account to report sightings. The result provides a 4-day snapshot of bird distribution and abundance around the globe.

Here's what you do:

-  Count the highest total of each bird species for at least a 15-minute period in your yard, or wherever you want. Taking the highest total avoids duplicate counting.
-  Create your GBBC account and send your totals for one or more days during the GBBC period to www.birdsource.org. Use a separate checklist for each day or each site on a given day. The on-line checklist is user-friendly. If you are unable to submit your list, ask a friend to create an account and to submit your list for you.

National Audubon collaborates with the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and Bird Studies Canada to bring GBBC to you. If you'd like to continue this kind of monitoring through the winter, you should look into participating in Project FeederWatch by going to www.birds.cornell.edu/pfw/.



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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What Is an Optimum/Sustainable Population for Vermont?

Report from *Vermonters for a Sustainable Population*

Review and Editorial by
Warren King



VIEWPOINT

“What Is an Optimum/Sustainable Population for Vermont?” is a 64-page report on human population and resource use impacts from a variety of perspectives in Vermont past, present and future. *Vermonters for a Sustainable Population*, under the leadership of executive director George Plumb, pulled together and released the report in 2013. It was written by 16 Vermont authors and edited by Heather V. Davis. The report is available on the *Vermonters for a Sustainable Population* website vspop.org.

Human population growth and resource use and its consequent impacts is the world’s most pressing long-term problem, but it is a problem almost everyone shies away from, especially the population part. It goes largely undiscussed and undealt with, the increasingly large elephant in an increasingly small room. This report hopes to get Vermonters talking about these issues.

Each author takes a crack at the question posed in the report title. Guesses on the optimum/sustainable Vermont population range from 150,000 to 700,000, averaging 489,078. Vermont exceeded this figure in 1979. Vermont’s 2013 population was 626,011.

The lowest population figure is in the chapter on human population footprint. This chapter, which is based on actual data, reveals how far we overshoot sustainability in Vermont and the globe. Each person on the planet uses resources that require 2.2 hectares of land on average, our ecological footprint. But there are only 1.9 hectares of biologically productive capacity per person on the planet. The difference is made up by depletion of natural capital and build-up of waste. The footprint of each U.S. inhabitant is 9.57 hectares. If everyone used 9.57 hectares worth of natural resources, it would take 5 Earths to provide them. Earth can only sustain 1.2 billion people at a footprint of 9.57 hectares per person. We passed 7 billion in October 2011.

The chapter on biodiversity estimates 150,000 as sustainable for Vermont (Vermont’s 2.4 million hectares divided by 1.9 hectares for each person in Vermont in 2013), but allows for 310,000, half the current population, under certain stringent conditions. It acknowledges the need to put some productive land in reserve to replenish the natural resources used. The trick to achieving sustainability will be to reduce each Vermonter’s natural resource use to 1.9 hectares’ worth or to reduce the population to 150,000. Sustainability can only come from population decline, seriously reduced natural resource use, or more likely, a combination of the two. But none of us wants to be the first to make major life style sacrifices or to have reproductive decisions made for us.

The biodiversity chapter raises the importance of ecosystem services, the essential services provided by the healthy functioning of all the species on the planet interacting with each other and with their habitats. They bring us all essential but usually ignored benefits like clean air and water, decomposition, control of climate and disease, genetic diversity, nutrient cycles and pollination. The near-sighted anthropocentric view of the world that remains pervasive today is as a resource that was put here for our exclusive use. The need to get beyond anthropocentrism has never been greater. The report’s recommendations provide a start, although readers may balk at the emphasis on population reduction in Vermont. Vermont’s population has been stable for the last four years, it is next to last in numbers of the 50 states, and it is facing the demographic and economic challenges inherent in having too many old folks and too few youngsters.

George Plumb summarizes in his introduction: “Vermonters presently import approximately ninety-five percent of everything we consume, ranging from the food we eat, to the computers we use. At the same time, we export one hundred percent of our greenhouse gas emissions, much of our water pollution, and a high percentage of our solid waste. This has a huge impact on the environment of the rest of the Earth. While it is true that relative to other states our impact is smaller, it is still very significant.” 🌱

Our Birds and the Challenge of Climate Change

National Audubon scientists, under Chief Scientist Gary Langham, have been preparing a publication for a peer-reviewed scientific journal that summarizes the threats posed by climate change to North American birds. Audubon chapters will receive background papers and information on these studies sometime during the spring of 2014. We'll be able to share with you:

- Fact sheets that encapsulate the science behind climate change
- The bird species at greatest risk from a changing climate
- Profiles of some of the high-profile birds at risk
- Talking points to ease your comfort level in discussions with friends
- Sample newsletter articles and letters to the editor

Then it will be up to us all to take on the tasks of protecting key habitats and populations, mitigating climate impacts by reducing our release of greenhouse gases from all sources, and convincing others to do likewise. Audubon President David Yarnold has called climate change "the greatest threat since humans have been on the planet." Look for Otter Creek Audubon follow-up in the May 2014 issue of *Otter Tracks*. 🐾



Four-toed Salamander, uncommon in Vermont. photo by Jim Andrews

2014 Salamander Escorts

OCAS will provide limited salamander escort coverage once again this spring at the Morgan Road site 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 road traffic 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 2014 program is from Monday, March 17th to Sunday, April 6th. Otter Creek Audubon will have organizers present on two nights that we consider to be "sure things" based on the meteorological forecast. We will alert our 2014 email list, and will post notice on OCAS' Facebook page.

Amphibian movement starts at dark

and can go to 1 AM. As a volunteer you arrive or leave when you wish, gather data for an hour or two, usually starting about 8:30. 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 2014 salamander volunteer email list. *Sign up even if you signed up last year or in 2012.* Provide an email address that you will see around supptime. 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 up, we will provide you with directions and other information. 🐾

Wooly Adelgid Update



Eastern Hemlock infested by woolly adelgids.

Those little white tufts of fluff on hemlocks called hemlock wooly adelgids are now well established in Windham and Bennington counties in Vermont. These aphid relatives cause little damage in their native East Asia because the trees they infest there have evolved resistance to adelgids. Our trees have not. Another adelgid species kills balsam and Fraser firs in the mid-Atlantic states. Pesticide application may be helpful on selected individual trees, but is too expensive for broad treatment of hemlock stands. As a potential control organism, a tiny black lady beetle relative, also native to East Asia, is undergoing initial testing in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Songbirds are known to spread adelgids during

the spring and summer months. Two ways you can help to limit the spread:

- Make sure your feeders are at least 100 feet from the nearest hemlock, and
- Take down your feeders from April through August.

These steps seem a small price to pay for the retention of hemlocks around our homes. In Virginia's Shenandoah National Park 80 percent of the hemlocks are now needleless and dead, thanks to adelgids. We need to do all we can to prevent adelgid spread from continuing into central Vermont. 🐾

Sapsuckers in Winter

by Ron Payne



Male Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, an unlikely species in winter in Vermont, observed on the Middlebury Christmas Bird Count.

photo by Sabrina Warner

There have been an unusually high number of reports of overwintering Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers through December and January. One or two reports are not so unusual, but this winter at least ten have been sighted in Addison County. Why they chose this year, with its numerous deep cold snaps, to do so is a bit of a mystery. Sapsuckers are named for their behavior of drilling shallow holes in bark and drinking the flowing sap with their brushy tongues, but that food source is turned off in winter. However, you can't build a Sapsucker on sugar alone, so insects comprise a large part of their diet, providing their usual source of protein. But at a time of low insect activity, and without their cousin woodpeckers' ability to drill deep for hidden larvae, insects don't seem a likely reason. That would leave the third component of their diet, berries. If I were to speculate, I would guess this might be the explanation. When it comes to fruiting plants, there one that currently has a spectacular crop, the red cedar. Though technically not berries, birds gobble up red cedar fruits readily, and Sapsuckers are one of the many species that partake of them. 🐾

Toxoplasmosis and Rabies in Cats

Recent studies have heightened concerns about domestic cats as carriers of toxoplasmosis and rabies. Both may be transmitted to unwary hosts.

A Johns Hopkins study published in *Trends in Parasitology* showed that toxoplasmosis infects up to 74 percent of domestic cats during the cats' lifetime. The parasitic toxoplasma protozoan only reproduces sexually in cats, but other mammals, including otters and humans, can become infected by contact with infected cats' fecal material. In humans the risk is most severe in pregnant mothers and immune-compromised individuals, but people with healthy immune systems are now understood to be susceptible as well. Threats range from academic underachievement and modest behavioral changes to schizophrenia, Alzheimer's disease, suicidal behavior, obsessive-compulsive disorder and brain cancer. The researchers state: "It should be noted that the play areas of children, especially sandboxes and gardens to which cats have access, are infectious". There is no toxoplasmosis vaccination or treatment. The toxoplasma cysts occupy a variety of body parts of their hosts, including brains and sexual organs. There is growing evidence that toxoplasma organisms affect the behavior of their hosts.

A peer-reviewed Center for Disease Control and U.S. Department of Agriculture study in *Zoonoses and Public Health* shows cats to be the domestic animal most likely to carry rabies. Annually 25,000 cats are tested for rabies due to potential human exposure. The study points out that in Trap, Neuter and Release (TNR) feral cat colonies, of which there are thousands in the U.S., inadequate trapping rates do not assure that all colony members are trapped for vaccination or rabies boosters. Infected cats can pass rabies to each other or any other unvaccinated mammals attracted to TNR colonies by the presence of regular food supplies.

Responsible cat owners get their cats vaccinated against rabies and get periodic rabies boosters for them as well.

Keeping cats indoors is the best strategy for preventing these infections in your furry companion or yourself. 🐾



Getting More Lead Out

The U.S. military recently announced that it has ordered lead-free 7.62 mm bullets for training purposes on ranges where the use of lead is prohibited. The move will eliminate an estimated 4000 metric tons of lead from the environment. This announcement follows a similar move in 2010 to reduce lead in certain uses of 5.56 mm enhanced performance ammunition. This earlier move has kept 2000 metric tons of lead from the environment. George Fenwick, American Bird Conservancy president, foresees a time when military purchases of non-lead ammunition will stimulate the lead-free ammunition market which will help remove one of the major hurdles to eliminating lead bullets, the somewhat higher cost of non-lead bullets.

Lead poisoning kills Bald Eagles, hawks, vultures, California Condors and Mourning Doves. Studies of captive Mourning Doves have shown that virtually all captive doves that ingest lead pellets died from lead poisoning. Although Vermont has no Mourning Dove open season, hunters across the U.S. kill 9 to 15 million Mourning Doves annually. Lead poisoning kills an equal number of Mourning Doves. 🐾

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.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 8 – 10 AM
Leader: Barry King

SATURDAY, MARCH 8, 8 – 10 AM
Leader: Barb Brosnan

THURSDAY, APRIL 10, 8 – 10 AM
Leader: Jim Phillips

SATURDAY, MAY 10, 7 – 9 AM
Leader: Ron Payne

THURSDAY, JUNE 12, 7 – 9 AM
Leader: To be announced

SEVENTH ANNUAL CABIN FEVER LECTURE SERIES

Second Thursdays, January–March. Downstairs
at Ilsley Library, 75 Main Street, Middlebury

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 7 PM
Scott Darling: Bats on the Brink

THURSDAY, MARCH 13, 7 PM
Allan Strong: The Bobolink Project



Red Cedar berries surround an American Robin, one of 3441 American Robins on the 2014 Ferrisburgh Christmas Bird Count. photo by Spencer Hardy

OCAS Calendar of Events February – May 2014

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 14 TO
MONDAY, FEBRUARY 17 **GREAT BACKYARD BIRD COUNT**
See www.birdsource.org and
article this issue, page 1.

MONDAY, MARCH 17 TO
SUNDAY, APRIL 6 **2014 SALAMANDER ESCORTS.** See
article, this issue. Contact Warren
or Barry King 388-4082 or
kinglet@together.net to sign up for
volunteer amphibian email alert list, even if you participated
last year.

SUNDAY, MAY 11 **WARBLER WARM-UP.** Ron Payne
7:30-10:30 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.

FRIDAY-SUNDAY **OTTER CREEK AUDUBON**
MAY 16-18 **BIRDATHON.** See further
information in the May 2014
Otter Tracks.



Female Rose-breasted Grosbeak, an unlikely winter visitor, contemplating a bath on the Mt Abraham Christmas Bird Count. photo by Randy Durand

A Changing of the Raptor Guard

by Ron Payne



Short-eared Owl

Photo by Dario Sanches/Flicker

By planned meeting and coincidence, five birders, Ian Worley, Pat Folsom, Ali Wagner, Tyler Pockette and I all converged on Country Club Road in Addison on an early December evening. As the sun began to set we searched the surrounding fields for our desired target. Too early yet, we watched a Rough-legged Hawk fly from tree to tree, seemingly choosing the spindliest perch on each one, eventually working its way out of sight. Horned Larks and Snow Buntings occasionally bubbled out of the corn stubble in front of us, but soon they were no longer to be seen.

Then it was the turn of two Harriers to take command of the air over the fields, coursing back and forth and diving toward the ground after prey from time to time. Harriers being similar in behavior to our objective, we watched them intently as they came in and out of view, but as the light dwindled we began to despair about our chances of actually seeing it. But as is so often the case with this species, it is when you start to feel really discouraged that you are rewarded. Tyler called out, "What about this one?" And sure enough, seemingly without any transition, the Harriers were gone and had been replaced by our quarry, a Short-eared Owl! It flew along a fence line and perched on a fence post and then a tree about 100 yards in front of us, affording us great views through binoculars and spotting scopes, regarding our party curiously through its black-masked eyes. It then flew around the field, where it was soon joined by a second Short-eared, the two of them swirling and circling together in a great display, at one point very closely in front of us. This went on for about ten minutes or so until a pair of trucks came down this little used road, after which the owls disappeared into the darkness. 🐾

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