



Otter Creek Audubon Society

September
2014

Otter Tracks

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Above: Rodney Olsen with a Red-tailed Hawk. Photo by Ron Payne



Right: Opossum at the live animal display. Photo by Gary Starr

13th Annual Dead Creek Wildlife Day Saturday, October 4, 2014



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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Dead Creek Wildlife Day brings you Vermont's most capable presenters of natural history information on a wide variety of topics. The whole family will enjoy the live Wild Critters of Vermont up close to learn about their adaptations for survival. Also, Vermont's deer biologist will present an overview of deer population dynamics, ecology and hunting considerations. You'll see retrievers bringing in game and demonstrating search and rescue techniques. You can get wildlife photography tips from an expert. And under expert guidance you or your children can carve decoys or wildlife from soap or wood and then take home your work. Kids and their parents will enjoy putting together bluebird nest boxes and putting them up at home, too.

Want to learn the secrets of telling apart one sparrow species from another? The banders of

the Dead Creek Bird Observatory will be at the Route 17 Dead Creek bridge boat launch from 7 AM to noon showing how they capture, mark and determine birds' identity, age and sex. And there will be a special bird walk for beginners as well as a butterfly walk. Binoculars will be available for your use, or bring your own.

Events take place Saturday, October 4 from 10 AM to 4 PM. The Addison School PTA provides a healthy lunch and snacks at reasonable prices. Most presentations will be at the Dead Creek Wildlife Management Area headquarters, on Route 17 one mile west of Route 22A in Addison. Others take place nearby, with continuous free shuttle bus service from the headquarters. The enclosed schedule of events will help you plan your day so you don't miss events important to you, your family or friends. 🐾

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A Feathered Tempest

Editorial by
Warren King



VIEWPOINT

One hundred years ago on September 1st a Passenger Pigeon named Martha succumbed to the rigors of old age at the Cincinnati Zoo. She was the last of her species. Passenger Pigeons, believed to have been the planet's most abundant bird species with an estimated population of 3-5 billion, were known for their habit of nomadic migration, traveling in endless rivers of birds searching for beech, oak and chestnut mast, their primary food. John James Audubon wrote in the 1830's "The air was literally filled with pigeons, the light of noonday was obscured as by an eclipse; the dung fell in spots not unlike melting flakes of snow....pigeons were still passing in undiminished numbers and continued to do so for three days in succession."

In his 1955 book *The Passenger Pigeon: Its Natural History and Extinction*, A.W. Schorger lays blame for the Passenger Pigeon's decline and extinction to uncontrolled harvesting during migration and while nesting. In it, the most comprehensive treatment of the species, Schorger offers statistics on the extent of the slaughter of Passenger Pigeons in migration and at their breeding sites. Eyewitness accounts from the 19th century describe roosting pigeons several bodies deep occupying every inch of trees in a roost, causing large tree limbs to crash down. Hunters used guns of all kinds, poles, oars, burning sulfur, fire, netting, alcohol-soaked grain, traps of many designs and even bare hands to kill pigeons, taking full advantage of their short-term local superabundance.

Two inventions contributed to the hunters' success, the telegraph and the railroad, the former to spread word instantly of the location of nesting or roosting sites, and the latter to provide mass transport of pigeons, starting in the 1850s, to local and regional markets. Market price varied depending on availability and state of preservation, from a few pennies to \$2.65 per dozen.

The Passenger Pigeon's strategy of overwhelming your enemies by sheer numbers (known as predator satiation) worked well for the species until we created an effective means of getting huge numbers of pigeons to market. Harvest of both migrants and breeders left no respite for the species. In fifty years overwhelming numbers went from being the species' best protection to the weakness that assured its demise. The last pigeon was shot in the wild in 1900; Martha, probably captive-bred, died 14 years later.

Legal protection for birds came as the direct result of the Passenger Pigeon's extinction. It came too late to save that species, but the first protection laws, including the Lacey Act and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, passed the U.S. Congress in the same decade. With only very minor change they continue to protect our native bird species.

In the late 1800's, as the Passenger Pigeon's numbers declined, the view of its abundance as being limitless grew. People everywhere were increasingly assured that there were so many Passenger Pigeons that no amount of utilization would impact their population. Yet only a few years later, they were gone.

We see a direct parallel with the view initially promoted by big business that the climate is not changing. That view is now evolving in the face of undeniable evidence to the view that the climate may be changing but our species has had little to do with that change. A national poll late in 2013 indicated just 44 percent of people in the U.S. believed humans are causing climate change in spite of near unanimous confirmation by the world's climate scientists. Skepticism and indifference in the face of global crisis may be humankind's great weakness. It may presage the decline of our species, which appears unable to adapt to a changed world of our own making. The lesson to be learned from the Passenger Pigeon's demise 100 years ago has gone unappreciated, even when we stand to benefit most by comprehending it. 🐾



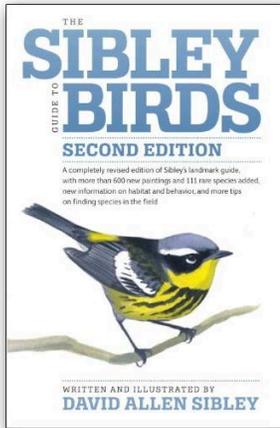
Passenger Pidgeon drawing
by James J. Audubon



**Make a
Difference for
Birds and Wildlife**

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www.AudubonAction.org



Book Review:
**The Sibley Guide
 To Birds, 2nd Ed.**
 by David Allen Sibley

Alfred A. Knopf,
 New York, 2014. 624 pgs.

Review by Ron Payne

When David Allen Sibley published the *Sibley Guide to Birds* in 2000, the combination of sharp, accurate artwork, including multiple plumages, and at the time the most comprehensive list of species available

in a bird guide made it an instant classic, quickly becoming a must have for North American birders. But at 14 years old, it had begun to show its age, falling behind on taxonomic changes and out of date on species distribution, not to mention the few flaws it always had that needed improvement. So when Sibley announced he was producing a second edition of his guide with more than 600 new paintings and the addition of 111 rare species, the news was met with great anticipation. But when the book got into the hands of reviewers and birders, reaction was mixed at best and from some readers downright negative.

The main complaint of the nay-sayers is the colors. There was always criticism that the reds were oversaturated or too bright in the original edition, making some muted birds like thrushes look more Technicolor than they do in real life. It's clear that Sibley attempted to correct this in his new edition, but in the eyes of many he went too far, leaving all the pictures too dark and muddy. Sibley has defended this, saying that he worked closely with the publisher and printers to effect a rich and warm color pallet. For the most part I agree with his assessment, but in a few instances, particularly with dark birds like gallinules and coots, details like eyes get lost in the darkness. Sibley has announced that when the second printing of this

edition comes out in September some of these color issues will be corrected.

Another big issue with the book has to do with the text itself. The font chosen is very fine, so much so that reading glasses are a must for those who use them, which is a big problem if you are trying to use the book in the field and have to switch between glasses and binoculars. There are also a few minor typos. In the index for gulls, for example, Heerman's and Black-tailed have their labels swapped.

For me the plusses of the new edition completely outweigh the minuses. The first thing you'll notice is that the pictures of the birds are larger and there are a lot more of them. Finches, for example, are enhanced with a new set of pictures of them quartering toward you. There is also a big improvement in the species descriptions. Generalized sentences covering two species are now replaced with a concise description for each species. And the index pages for species groups are greatly enhanced by having page numbers next to the birds, the lack of which in the first edition was always very frustrating to me.

I also very much appreciate the addition of more rare species in this volume. Common Pochard, which caused such a stir on Lake Champlain two winters ago, was not included in the original book but is now in the new one. And it was helpful to be able to use the new edition to aid in identifying the Pink-footed Goose that visited Salisbury this past spring. And inclusion of other birds like Gray Heron, our Great Blue's Eurasian cousin, gives birders the chance to familiarize themselves with potential vagrants before they show up.

Another great feature is the addition of many more "learning pages," pictures accompanied by paragraphs that help you with some bird identification challenges. Some of my favorites are a visualization of woodpecker drumming, pictures of downy ducklings, and improved treatments of *Accipiter* and small shorebird identification.

So, on balance I find the *Second Edition of the Sibley Guide to Birds* to be a huge improvement over the first. If the first edition was a must have for birders than the second is even more so. The only caveat to that would be that perhaps one should wait for the second printing to get the promised color corrections. 🐾

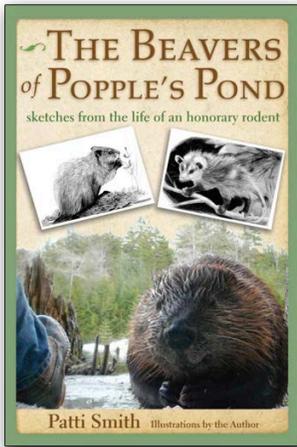


**A Flash
 of Ruby
 in a
 White
 World**

By Ron Payne

It is not a great oddity to experience a mid-April snowstorm but after the hard winter we had been through in 2013-2014 it did feel particularly unwelcome. Still, the morning after the storm I was curious how the recently returned birds would react to it, so I ventured out into a snow-blanketed world to my regular birding haunt, Otter View Park in Middlebury. The walk down the trails to the boardwalk was interesting in itself. The snow-bowed branches across the trail forced me to crouch to get through in several places. When I reached the marsh I found an odd mixture of snow-covered cattails protruding from high water with Red-winged Blackbirds singing their spring song from atop them. At the end of the boardwalk I was pleased to find some Canada Geese, a Wood Duck and a Pied-billed Grebe on the fast flowing river.

Then I heard the cheery song of a Ruby-crowned Kinglet coming from some nearby shrubs. This was the first of the year that I had heard so I wanted to be sure to get a look at it. When I found it, it was quickly joined by another and another, until there were six together in the bush. All males, the song turned to aggressive chattering and they all began flashing their normally hidden, namesake ruby crests. This is always a splendid sight when you are lucky enough to see it, but the amazing contrast of their brilliant red crests against the white landscape around them made it seem even more beautiful. 🐾



Book Review:
The Beavers of Popple's Pond

Written and Illustrated By Patti Smith

Green Writer's Press, Vermont, 2014. 285 pgs.

Review by Barry King

[Full disclosure: Patti Smith and I have been friends since she worked at Keewaydin in 1985, so mine is not an unbiased viewpoint.]

The *Beavers of Popple's Pond* is a wonderful, whimsical blend of Patti's first-person careful observations with painless natural history lessons. Her insightful descriptions morph seamlessly into discussions of the science behind what she's seeing. In the book's first part, Patti describes six years of observing a family of beavers as they move from pond to pond near her home in Marlboro, VT. She watched them mature, have young and create new areas. Although she did bring food treats, Patti, a certified wildlife rehabilitator and BEEC naturalist, never tried to tame the beavers. By fitting herself into their rhythms, she managed to gain an amazing amount of their trust. They became so accepting of her calm presence that they often sat near her to feed and at times made physical contact.

Patti's persistence without insistence allowed her to immerse herself in the lives of a variety of other wildlife species, as depicted in the book's second section. One example was an evening on the shore of a beaver pond:

[With the grey tree frog] chorus in full throat, I heard a duck-like squawk... [It] drew me to a spruce bough upon which two male tree frogs were engaged in a shoving match to establish which would hold this coveted wooing territory. The loser soon retreated.]

This book is filled with captivating vignettes about the overlooked, quotidian lives of small—and large—creatures that share our world. Readers are left feeling that we too could glimpse these lives if only we possessed Patti's patience and willingness to sit quietly outside. Her book may inspire you to do so or it may just leave you happy that someone else has reported her findings in such a lively, readable and joyful manner.🐾



Audubon Continues Partnership with VELCO in Shrubland Survey; Volunteers help with targeted Golden-winged Warbler Survey

For the third consecutive year Audubon Vermont worked collaboratively with the Vermont Electric Power Company (VELCO) to conduct a survey of priority shrubland bird species along the VELCO right-of-way (ROW). In addition, Audubon staff and volunteers surveyed numerous private properties for “winged warblers” (Golden-winged and Blue-winged and their hybrids) in the southern Champlain Valley. Fifteen teams of observers from Rutland County Audubon, Otter Creek Audubon and Green Mountain Audubon chapters participated in the surveys this year.

Audubon observer teams scoured their assigned VELCO routes and winged warbler sites once a year during the survey period from late May – late June. Eastern Towhee and Field Sparrow were the most common target species observed on the VELCO routes each year (see table). Audubon Vermont has compared the bird locations with management practices used by VELCO and developed recommendations to enhance the shrubland bird habitat within the ROW.

Results of VELCO Survey, 2012-2014:

Species	Number Observed 2012	Number Observed 2013	Number Observed 2014*
Golden-winged Warbler	7	8	8
Blue-winged Warbler	13	16	12
Blue-Golden winged hybrid	1	3	6
Eastern Towhee	66	90	66
Brown Thrasher	10	5	3
Prairie Warbler	19	22	19
Field Sparrow	65	78	39
American Woodcock	1	1	0
Brown-headed Cowbird	n/a	50	16
Total Individuals	182	273	169

* Preliminary results for 2014; not all sites surveyed in 2014

With the generous help of Ted Murin, who identified approximately 130 potential Golden-winged Warbler sites in the southern Champlain Valley via the study of aerial photos, we were able to target areas for the winged warbler survey. Audubon was aware of some of these early successional sites from the VELCO survey, previous work with landowners, and eBird, but most sites were on private land and required permission to access. Audubon Vermont sent letters to approximately 150 landowners and received permission to survey approximately 40 sites.

The 2014 survey found approximately 200 male winged warblers in the previously un-surveyed locations. The ratio was roughly 35% Golden-winged, 40% Blue-winged and 25% hybrid (Lawrence's or Brewster's). Audubon staff will reconnect with these landowners this fall and winter to explore opportunities for on-the-ground management activities. With landowner permission, additional areas will be surveyed in 2015.🐾

OCAS Calendar of Events

September– December 2014

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 7 11 AM–2 PM **HAWK WATCH AT BUCK MOUNTAIN, WALTHAM.** Migrating Broad-winged Hawks should be at peak numbers. Meet at 10:30 AM at Vergennes Park and Ride, junction of Routes 22A and 7, Vergennes, or 11 at the trailhead on Route 66. Joint outing with Green Mountain Audubon, led by Ron Payne, Warren King and Bruce MacPherson. Call Warren at 388-4082 for more information or if in doubt about the weather.

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 4 9:30 AM–4 PM **DEAD CREEK WILDLIFE DAY.** Call 802-241-3700 for information. See article this issue.

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 13 5:30–8:45 PM **OCAS ANNUAL DINNER AND MEETING.** The speaker is Rosalind Renfrew, conservation biologist with the Vermont Center for Ecostudies, editor of the second *Vermont Breeding Bird Atlas*, and author of several publications summarizing aspects of her research on Bobolink distribution and migration between Vermont and Argentina and Bolivia. The title of her talk is “The Double Life of Bobolinks.” Reservations needed for dinner at 6. No fee for talk at 7:15.

Dinner 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. See article in November *Otter Tracks*.

ADDISON COUNTY CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNTS
(Look for article in November *Otter Tracks*)

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 14 **MIDDLEBURY CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT.** Call Jim or Kris Andrews at 352-4734 for details.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 20 **FERRISBURGH CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT.** Call Mike Winslow at 877-6586 for details.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 20 **MT. ABE CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT.** Call Randy or Cathy Durand at 453-4370 for details.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 3 **HINESBURG CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT:** Call Paul Wiczorek at 802/434-4216 for details.

OCAS Education Activities

By Carol Ramsayer



Cornwall's 1st Grade birding morning
Photo by Gary Starr

For five Thursdays in May, the Salisbury Community School 1st and 2nd graders learned about bird identification field marks, went bird-watching through woods around their school, and explored how different birds feed, spearheaded by their science teacher, Amy Clapp and three OCAS members. Gary

Starr demonstrated bird carving. Each child took a bird home to paint after practicing carving (with a real knife!). An OCAS member donated a beginning bird guide to each of these 1st and 2nd graders.

The Salisbury students raised \$550 in a school-wide Bird-athon for bird-friendly plantings. Parents, teachers and students alike gained newfound appreciation for birds' place in the natural world, thanks to the yearlong inspired teaching of Ms. Clapp and support from OCAS.

Also in May, three OCAS members joined Cornwall Elementary School 1st graders in a morning of birding at Otter View Park. All used the OCAS “real” binoculars, which brought distant Red-winged Blackbirds and Baltimore Orioles to life.

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.

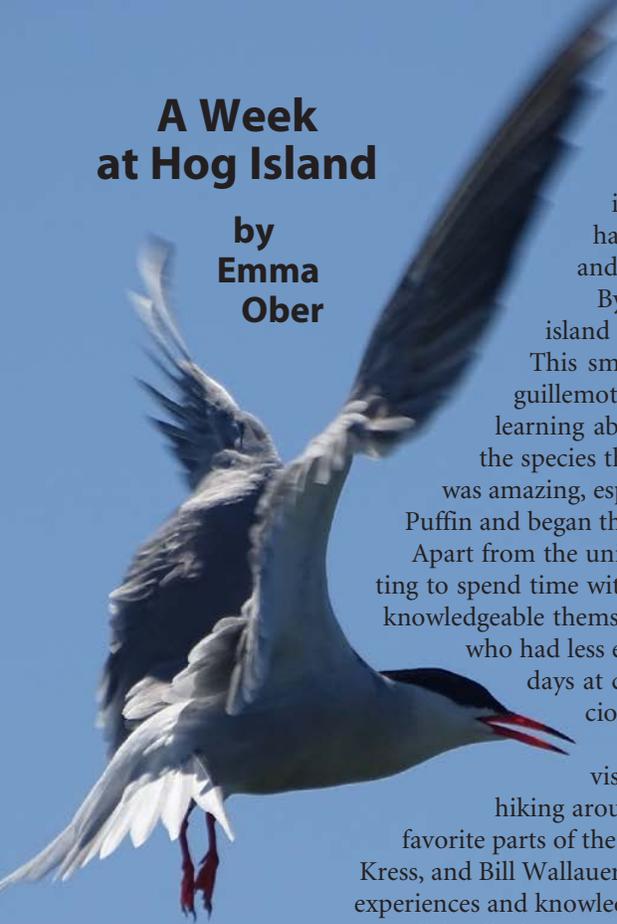
SATURDAY, SEPT 13, 8–10 AM Leader: Ron Payne	SATURDAY, NOV 8, 8–10 AM Leader: To be announced
THURSDAY, OCT 9, 8–10 AM Leader: To be announced	THURSDAY, DEC 11, 8–10 AM Leader: To be announced

OCAS funded four additional school activities. Mary Hogan Elementary School 3rd and 4th graders, led by Steve Flint, learned about river ecology, and released brook trout they had raised from eggs with OCAS support at learning stations. At the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum, Shoreham 6th graders participated in the Paddling Ecology program, collecting water samples and studying organisms through microscopes. Rodney Olsen's Diversified Occupation students traveled to Braddock Bay, New York, furthering their bird banding skills. Finally, Gwen Zwickel led Bridport Central School's summer camp for 3rd and 4th graders, including afternoon field trips around birds and flight. Five OCAS members provided enrichment activities.

OCAS members are looking forward to new outdoor learning adventures for Addison County school children this fall. To volunteer, contact Carol Ramsayer at cgramsmac@mac.com.

A Week at Hog Island

by
**Emma
Ober**



With the generous help of Otter Creek Audubon, I was able to attend the Hog Island Teen Ornithology camp in Maine this summer. This camp was a remarkable experience that I would highly recommend to anyone interested in having fun outdoor experiences and learning a lot. The staff and teachers are amazing. I had the great privilege of meeting and working with renowned ornithologists Steve Kress and Scott Weidensaul as well as many other interesting and inspiring staff.

By far the coolest experience, in my opinion, was our trip to Eastern Egg Rock, a small island off the coast of Maine that is home to one of the first fully restored seabird colonies. This small rock is home to puffins; Common, Roseate, and Arctic terns; Laughing Gulls; guillemots; and eiders. We got to spend an incredible three hours on the island, observing and learning about the birds and the roles people play in keeping the island safe, and maintaining the species that live there. Getting to spend time on the island surrounded by thousands of birds was amazing, especially getting introduced to the island by Steve Kress, the man who founded Project Puffin and began the journey of rehabilitating Eastern Egg Rock.

Apart from the unique experiences, it was also a pleasure to meet the many other campers. I loved getting to spend time with other kids my age who shared my interests in nature and wildlife. They were very knowledgeable themselves, and I learned about as much from them as from any of the staff. As someone who had less experience birding, I was glad that everyone was very understanding and helpful. The days at camp were full and exhausting. After waking at the crack of dawn and eating a delicious breakfast, we would head out for a full day of activities. These included getting an introduction to bird banding, boating around on the ocean looking at shorebirds, visiting the mainland to see inland birds, and collecting sea life at low tide. We spent time hiking around the island, learning its history and enjoying the beauty it has to offer. One of my favorite parts of the day was the after dinner program. We got to hear talks from Scott Weidensaul, Steve Kress, and Bill Wallauer and Kristin Mosher, who were photographers for Jane Goodall. They all shared their experiences and knowledge about their various fields of study.

All in all, this was an amazing experience anyone would enjoy and learn from, no matter their birding expertise. 🐾

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Otter Tracks

Otter Creek Audubon Society

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