



Otter Creek Audubon Society

February  
2015

# Otter Tracks

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## 18<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL GREAT BACKYARD BIRD COUNT

February 13-16, 2015



### 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

Ron Payne, President  
Warren King, Editor  
388-4082

Winslow Colwell, Design and Layout  
www.wcolwell.com

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The 2015 Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) takes place Friday, February 13, through Monday, February 16. Last year for the second time GBBC joined up with eBird to provide global coverage. 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 can no longer mail in your observations. Go to [www.birdcount.org](http://www.birdcount.org) and click on Get Started. You'll find downloadable instructions to create your free account, to enter your 2015 observations, and to learn about the opportunities available to you. If you are already registered with eBird or Project Feederwatch, 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.birdcount.org](http://www.birdcount.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.feederwatch.org](http://www.feederwatch.org). 

**Red Warbler.**

Photo by 2014 GBBC Participant Juan Pablo Medina Castro

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## The Tightrope

**Editorial by  
Warren King**



## VIEWPOINT

Vermont Fish and Wildlife deer biologist Adam Murkowski walks a tightrope. He recommends to the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Board the number of antlered bucks and antlerless deer that can be killed by hunters each year, based on examination of harvested deer, including weight, age, sex, antler base diameter and health of bone marrow. Some hunters would prefer more trophy-sized bucks. Some would like more deer in the woods. Since it's the number of does that determines the population potential, most hunters prefer to take bucks. Too few deer or too few large deer and the hunters grow restive. Too many deer and the farmers, foresters, loggers, gardeners, bird watchers, botanists, drivers and insurance companies object.



photo by Matthew J. O'Brien

Prior to settlement, the size of the herd in Vermont was smaller. Catamounts, wolves and cold, snowy winters controlled it as did the lack of habitat due to few openings in the forest. The extensive forest clearing that happened by the mid-1850's spurred the demise of these predators and opened up lots of edge for deer to browse. Their numbers swelled in response. But forest gradually reclaimed three-quarters of the state, and deer numbers declined. Harvest by hunters replaced top predators as the major control measure.

Because deer browse a wide variety of plant species, they have a big impact on which plants—and birds—survive in our forests. Unfortunately, deer avoid most invasive plants like garlic mustard, buckthorn, honeysuckle and barberry although they do like purple loosestrife. On the other hand, our native plants are hit hard by deer browsing and then have to compete with the thriving invasives for space. When there is serious deer overpopulation, they denude the forest understory of native plants, including seedlings of commercially valuable trees like oaks, sugar maple and white ash while leaving behind less valuable and/or invasive species. Deer heavily browse many wildflowers and shrubs, significantly altering what grows. (In study areas that exclude deer, the difference in understory plants is dramatic.) This change to the understory means that deer browsing affects ground nesting and shrub nesting birds by removing cover and changing the kind of plants that do survive.

Foresters have commented during public comment periods that they would like to see deer reduced to a quarter of their current abundance. The health of the deer herd now controls the health of the forest. Deer numbers move up and down fast; forests take longer to grow. The Fish and Wildlife Department listens raptly to hunters, less so or not at all to wildflower enthusiasts, foresters or car insurance adjusters.

If forest health determined the size of the deer herd and not vice versa, we would have more productive, more diverse forests with fewer invasive plants and far fewer deer. One more thing for Adam to think about on his tightrope. 🐾

## Care of Bird Feeders



Many of us provide supplemental food for the birds even though the evidence that birds benefit from feeders is mixed. In a careful study comparing winter survival of 576 Black-capped Chickadees over three years in Wisconsin in areas with and without supplemental food, feeding improved survival only in years in which more than five days were below 0°F. With milder temperatures survival was unchanged (Brittingham, M.C. and S.A. Temple, 1988. Impacts of supplemental feeding on survival rates of Black-capped Chickadees. *Ecology* 69: 581-589). The other songbirds that visit feeders are more challenging to study, and the evidence of feeding on their survival, not surprisingly, is ambiguous.

Regardless of the benefit to birds, we are likely to feed birds because they entertain us. But with feeding comes certain responsibilities. Bears take advantage of feeders, as we all know, and can acclimate to human presence to the point they become nuisances or threats. Vermont state bear biologist Forrest Hammond says: "A fed bear is a dead bear." So, providing seed for birds should take place only when bears have retired for the winter, between Thanksgiving and April Fool's Day to be safe.

Bird feeders that attract large numbers of birds can easily become sites for disease transmission. When numerous, House Finches contract and pass on avian conjunctivitis at feeders.

Here are some tips.

- ❦ If your seed gets wet, replace it before it molds.
- ❦ Empty and clean your feeders monthly, or every two weeks if frequently visited. Immerse your feeders in a bath of one part liquid bleach to nine parts water. Scrub with a bottle brush, too.
- ❦ Cleanliness is especially important with hummingbird feeders since diseases are passed more readily when it is warm and the food is sugary liquid.

Feeder cleaning is nobody's favorite sport, but it is a price responsible bird feeders pay for their habit. ❦

## 2015 Salamander Escorts

On warm, wet nights from mid-March to mid-April frogs and salamanders move from their wintering sites on high ground to wetlands where they mate and lay eggs. Their route to the nearest vernal pool sometimes takes them across a road, where they run a considerable risk of mortality. At the most dangerous crossings they may suffer 50 percent mortality.

Across Vermont, groups of concerned individuals attempt to alter these amphibians' lethal odds by moving them off the road during nights of significant movement. This is the



Pickerel frog photo by Mark Nelson

twelfth spring that Otter Creek Audubon and the Salisbury Conservation Commission have patrolled a crossing site in Salisbury. This site retains not only large numbers of amphibians but also remarkable species diversity: four salamander and three frog species. On a big night we'll move

more than a thousand amphibians in a two-hour period.

You can witness this remarkable migration and help perpetuate it. You'll receive an email alert on the morning of a projected big night and then a confirming email at about 6

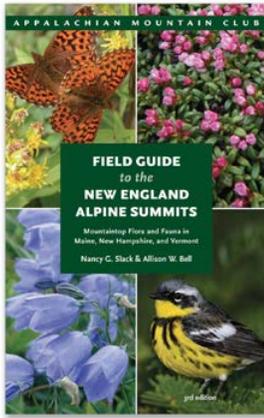
pm. Movement starts around 8:30 PM and can run for several hours. At this site traffic is infrequent and slow. Volunteers arrive and leave when they wish and are responsible for their own safety and the safety of others in their group. Upon arrival OCAS provides you with species identification tips and appropriate behavior. We'll record the numbers of each species we move for the first two hours. To sign up for the 2015 amphibian email alert, email [kinglet@together.net](mailto:kinglet@together.net) even if you were on the list before. ❦

## Golden-winged Warblers Hear Storms Coming

Golden-winged Warblers in Tennessee have shown an apparent ability to identify approaching major storms and undertake evasive movement.

Out of twenty Golden-winged Warblers fitted with geolocators in Tennessee in 2013, nine were known to have migrated to South America and to have returned to their Tennessee breeding grounds. The subsequent flight history of five of these birds is known. With a major storm 560 miles to the west that ultimately spawned 80 tornados and winds up to 100 miles per hour, all five birds, independently and over a two-day period, moved southeast to the Florida Gulf Coast or beyond to Cuba. By the time the storm was within 60 miles of their breeding grounds all five had moved hundreds of miles southeast, out of the storm's path. Six days later, after the storm had passed, all five birds had returned to their breeding grounds in Tennessee.

The researchers discounted changes in barometric pressure, wind speeds at and near the ground, and rainfall as triggers for the movement. The only trigger that explained the circumstances was infrasound waves. Other researchers have shown that elephants and whales communicate with sound waves below the range of human hearing. The researchers hypothesize that the warblers heard the sound of the approaching storm, which travels through the ground, and took appropriate evasive action. In this case evasive action involved movement well away from their breeding grounds, to which they had very recently returned, but had not yet begun to nest. ❦



### Book Review:

## Field Guide to the New England Alpine Summits

Mountaintop Flora and Fauna in Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont

By Nancy G. Slack and Allison W. Bell

192 pages, Appalachian Mtn. Club Books; 3rd Edition, 2014

Review by Peg L. Goldman

This unique and now substantially expanded volume boasts over three hundred photographs of trees, flowering plants, mosses, lichens, ferns, liverworts, amphibians, mammals, and birds found at tree line and above on three mountaintops: Washington, Katahdin, and Mansfield in New Hampshire, Maine, and Vermont respectively. As a result of reading this

book, you may be tempted to become a volunteer citizen scientist to document the many alpine species as they live (or not) through the challenges of climate change. Also, Nancy Slack is looking for replacements to record data in her alpine snowbed community species research, begun in 2012.

This compact volume takes you from early explorations, geology, weather and climate, through the trailheads, the alpine zone, adaptations of alpine plants, alpine plant communities, animals in the alpine zone, conservation, and mountain plant phenology. The terminology Nancy uses is clear and understandable, so even if you never studied ecology or plant physiology you will comprehend what she describes.

Some of the photographed species you will never see unless you climb these high mountains. Because of its environmental uniqueness the alpine zone hosts many unique species you'll enjoy reading about and seeing, such as the White Mountain Fritillary butterfly, Bicknell's Thrush, and Diapensia. Allison Bell's exceptional photography is augmented by other sources including Kent MacFarland, Jeff Nadler, and the Harvard Archives. The photographs are picture perfect. ENJOY!! 🐾

## SPOTLIGHT:

### Vermont's Least Known Blackbird

The Rusty Blackbird, Vermont's least known blackbird, breeds in bogs, swampy woodlands and beaver ponds across Canada, reaching Alaska to the west and northern New England to the east. Breeding in Vermont is largely restricted to the Northeast Kingdom, but a few birds have nested along the southern Green Mountains. Rusties winter from southern New England to the Gulf Coast, often mixed in with huge flocks of Red-winged Blackbirds, Common Grackles and European Starlings. The species formerly nested sparingly in Addison County, but can only be found here now during their migration period from mid-March to the end of April and from September through November.

Rusty Blackbirds are similar in size to Red-winged Blackbirds, but lack the male Red-wing's brilliant red epaulets and the female's dense, dark streaks on breast and belly. Rusties have striking pale white-yellow eyes, unlike Red-wings but similar to Common Grackles, from which they differ in their smaller size, shorter bill and tail. Rusty male breeders have glossy dark green and purple plumage. Female and autumn males have rusty brown plumage

with a prominent dark triangular patch from the bill well past the eye.

Rusties are in big trouble. Data from the Audubon Christmas Bird Count and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Breeding Bird Census, the two most comprehensive, long-term continent-wide surveys, tell us the species has declined 85 to 95 percent in the last half century. In Vermont the species, always considered uncommon at best, decreased 26 percent between the first Breeding Bird Atlas (field work 1976-1981) and the second Breeding Bird Atlas (field work 2003-2007). In 1990 65-90 birds were estimated for the Northeast Kingdom, where it is most abundant in Vermont, declining to counts of 20 in 2007, 8 in 2008 and 5 in 2012. In 2013 the Vermont Endangered Species Committee, on the basis of strong recommendation from the Birds Advisory Group, recommended the species' status be changed from "special concern" to "endangered". In 2014 Agency of Natural Resources Secretary Markowitz approved this change following legislative review.

Uncertainty continues about the causes of decline. To assess the possibility of the decline resulting from conditions



Rusty Blackbird photo by Tyler Poquette

encountered on spring migration, the International Rusty Blackbird Working Group is organizing spring migration blitzes in 2014 and 2015. The blitzes document important stopover sites and year-to-year consistency of site use, and they heighten awareness in the birding community of the Rusty's plight. A combination of stressors is suggested as causing the decline. Habitat loss and degradation on the breeding grounds is a likely contributor. Climate change may play an important role in changing the species' preferred shallowly flooded boreal wetlands. And documented levels of mercury in Rusties are likely harmful to their immune systems and general health.

If you have adequate bird identification skills, you may want to participate in the 2015 Spring Rusty Blackbird Blitz by reporting your sightings to eBird.org. 🐾

## OCAS Calendar of Events February – May 2015

**FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 13 to  
MONDAY, FEBRUARY 16**     **GREAT BACKYARD BIRD COUNT.**  
See article this issue, page 1,  
and [www.birdcount.org](http://www.birdcount.org).

**MONDAY, MARCH 24 to  
SUNDAY, APRIL 12**     **2015 SALAMANDER ESCORTS.**  
See article, this issue. Contact  
Warren or Barry King 388-4082  
or [kinglet@together.net](mailto:kinglet@together.net) to sign up for volunteer amphibian  
email alert list, even if you participated last year.

**SUNDAY, MAY 10  
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.

**SATURDAY, MAY 2 to  
SUNDAY MAY 17**     **OTTER CREEK AUDUBON  
BIRDATHON.** See further informa-  
tion in the May 2015 *Otter Tracks*.

### 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 388-6019.

**THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 12, 8-10 AM**  
Leader: Barry King

**SATURDAY, MARCH 14, 8-10 AM**  
Leader: Barb Brosnan

**THURSDAY, APRIL 9, 8-10 AM**  
Leader: Jim Phillips

**SATURDAY, MAY 9, 7-9 AM**  
Leader: Ron Payne

**SATURDAY, JUNE 13, 7-9 AM**  
Leader: to be announced

### EIGHTH ANNUAL CABIN FEVER LECTURE SERIES

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

**THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 12, 7 PM**  
Hank Kaestner:

**BIRDING IN CENTRAL ASIA: A LISTER'S TRIP TO KAZAKHSTAN**

**THURSDAY, MARCH 12, 7 PM**

Mark LaBarr and Margaret Fowle:

**THE BEE, BUZZ, BUZZ ABOUT GOLDEN-WINGED WARBLERS**

## 2014 County Bird Quest Results by Ron Payne

County Quest just finished its 4th year, and once again Addison County wasn't able to grasp the top prize. A friendly competition between the counties of Vermont to see which county can find the highest number of bird species in a calendar year, County Quest is intended to get birders out in the field and submitting checklists to eBird.

Top honors in the overall par-weighted championship went to Franklin County this year. With their low par adjustment and habitats similar to Addison and Chittenden County, they always seemed destined to win this award if they put in the effort, and this year they certainly did, finding 20 more species than they have before. In the overall species count, Addison tied Chittenden County with 247 species. That was the highest number of species found in our county since the first year of the Quest in 2011, when we reported 250. In the category for number of checklists submitted to eBird, we did come away with a dominant first place, submitting 8161 checklists, a staggering 2274 more than our closest competitor, Chittenden County.

In the individual categories, Jim Mead was the top birder in the state for the third time in four years with 263 species found, and Cornwall resident Ian Worley continues his unbroken string of awards for the highest number of eBird checklists in the state, this year submitting 2332.

County Quest will continue again in 2015. You can participate by submitting your bird sightings to eBird. 🐾

### VT Firsts and Rarities

*continued from page 6*

Other notable sightings were a Garganey that spent late April and early May at the Ethan Allen Homestead in Burlington, a Brown Pelican that spent June 1 on Lake Dunmore in Salisbury, an American Avocet found at the Missisquoi National Wildlife Refuge on October 12, and a Harris's Sparrow in Bridport on November 29 that persisted in that location into the new year. 🐾



# A Record Year for Vermont Firsts and Rarities

by Ron Payne



Vermont just had a banner year for new bird species. The 2014 Vermont Bird Records Committee (VBRC) annual report accepted records for six species never before recorded in the state, the most since the committee began keeping records.

On January 1 Salisbury resident Tyler Pockette was viewing a group of falcons on Gage Rd. in Addison. Two were clearly Peregrines, but the third was lighter brown, showing a dark “armpit” under the wings. Tyler’s pictures clearly showed it to be a Prairie Falcon. A first for Vermont, it was also the easternmost documented Prairie Falcon in North America. A Prairie Falcon was found again in Addison in December, and then one was seen on Plum Island, Massachusetts, eclipsing the easternmost record.

On April 11 Scott Morrival and Ted Murin found a Pink-footed Goose embedded in a group of Canada Geese in the annually flooded fields along Creek Road in Salisbury. This species from Greenland and Europe has had increasing numbers of sightings in North America in the past few years, but this is the first fully documented Vermont record.

Fishermen Brandon Frank and Emily Hall spotted an “odd duck” on April 17 swimming along the shore of Shelburne Pond in Shelburne. They posted it to Flickr. A birder identified it as an Ancient Murrelet, a Pacific-breeding saltwater species, and encouraged them to submit a Rare Species Documentation form.

The video made acceptance of this record incontrovertible.

On May 8, a group of Fairbanks Museum employees identified a white chicken-like bird along Route 2 in St. Johnsbury as a Willow Ptarmigan. Northeast Kingdom Audubon’s Tom Berriman provided photos and video to document it. Willow Ptarmigans are tundra-breeding species rarely spotted south of treeline in the Northeast. Coincidentally perhaps, another Willow Ptarmigan was sighted in northern New York around the same time.

On May 26, Dave Johnston, a Connecticut River Valley resident, spotted a swan swimming in Potash Bay. He took pictures and good notes. An expert on North American swans helped him identify this bird as a Trumpeter Swan. This species is rarely found east of the Adirondacks. A pair of Tundra Swans, their cousins, was found also in Panton in November. They do not require rare species documentation.

On August 23 New York birder Gary Chapin spotted a Brown Booby on the New York side of the Champlain Bridge. Dozens of birders got word on the VT BIRD listserv and viewed this normally ocean-going species. It landed on a buoy known to be in Vermont waters late in the afternoon and again the next day and was sighted several times farther north in the next two weeks.

Prairie Falcon at Dead Creek, a first for Vermont photo by Tyler Pockette cont. on page 5

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Otter Creek Audubon Society  
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Middlebury, VT 05753