



# Otter Tracks

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## A Big Night



Spotted salamander (top) and Blue-spotted salamander (left)  
photos by Jennifer Murdoch

We needn't have worried. Movement started with one wood frog at 8:15, then a spring peeper, then a spotted salamander. By 9 PM 15 of us were unable to keep up with the flow across the 300-yard stretch of road the amphibians use. Only one car crossed,

early in the evening, so very few amphibians were killed. And it was comfortably warm and dry. We called it quits at 10:15, but the amphibians continued to come.

There is no assurance of another evening with the right conditions this year, but we can hope.

**F**riday, April 3<sup>rd</sup> looked to be an unlikely evening for amphibian movement. For 15 years Otter Creek Audubon, Salisbury Conservation Commission and friends have moved frogs and salamanders to safety at Morgan Road in Salisbury. Herpetologist Jim Andrews has been our advisor and partner throughout. Volunteers sign up to lend a hand, but we have had a few nights when there was more amphibian movement than we could handle. We always feel privileged to experience this natural rite of passage in person.

The conditions for movement occur less frequently than one would expect. Since warm, wet nights are ideal, often it's too cold or too dry between 8 and 10 PM, when people can help. On April 3<sup>rd</sup> the forecast called for ample warmth but with the rain ending by 4 pm. Would it stay wet long enough to tempt a few amphibians to venture out? Jim was confident the answer was yes, since motivation to cross to the vernal pools in Salisbury Swamp to breed was still strong. Crossing opportunities earlier in the season had been few.

### The Totals:

**Blue-spotted Salamander:**

307 alive, 1 dead

**Four-toed Salamander:**

27 alive, 1 dead

**Eastern Red-backed Salamander:**

20, all alive

**Spotted Salamander:**

149, all alive

**Eastern Newt:**

1 alive, 1 dead

**Wood Frog:**

153 alive, 1 dead

**Spring Peeper:**

74 alive, 1 dead

**Combined Totals: 731 alive, 5 dead**



### 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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## Control of Feral Cat Populations

Editorial by  
Warren King



# VIEWPOINT



photo by Sara Golemon

In the U.S. feral and domestic cats kill 1.4 billion birds annually. George Fenwick, President of the American Bird Conservancy, says "Irresponsible pet owners are the reason that cat predation is now the leading cause of bird mortality in the United States." Management of feral cat populations is an ongoing and controversial problem throughout the country. A research study released in an online open access journal in November 2014 (Miller, P.S. et al., *PLoS ONE* 9(11): e113553) compared for the first time the effectiveness of Trap, Neuter, Release (TNR) treatment with Trap and Removal (TR) or short-term contraception in isolated colonies (where cats neither join nor leave a colony) and open colonies of feral cats. Open colonies far more closely resemble actual conditions.

The research models showed that cat TR reduced cat populations faster and more effectively than TNR or contraceptive treatment. TNR did reduce cat populations, but because non-neutered feral cats are likely to join colonies, and not all cats in open colonies can be caught and neutered, population decline is much slower and less certain than with TR-treated colonies. The authors conclude "removal not only eliminates the reproductive potential of treated animals, but immediately subtracts them from the population." The authors of the study included several prominent TNR proponents as well as TR proponents.

Domestic cat numbers have tripled in the last 40 years. TNR is not a responsible answer to this problem when there are better ones available. TNR proponents seem to be concerned about the fate of individual cats at the expense of individual birds. 🐾

## Glyphosate: A Probable Carcinogen

The national health and environmental organization Beyond Pesticides has requested the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to reconsider the accepted uses of glyphosate (RoundUp) following a finding in March 2015 by the International Agency for Research on Cancer of "sufficient evidence of carcinogenicity" based on laboratory studies. Glyphosate is the country's most widely used pesticide. Although the EPA classified glyphosate in 1985 as "possibly carcinogenic to humans" on the basis of tumors in laboratory animals, the U.S. Department of Agriculture subsequently deregulated its use on most crops.

Glyphosate is toxic to aquatic organisms, especially amphibians. It is found regularly, however, in U.S. waterways. Its

extensive use in connection with genetically engineered corn and soybeans has led to tolerance of the chemical by some weed species. In 2014 cotton growers requested an emergency exemption for use of the chemical propazine when glyphosate was not having its desired effect. Glyphosate kills milkweed, contributing to the challenge monarch butterflies face finding milkweed for food and egg-laying during their annual multi-generational migration. EPA studies have shown glyphosate to cause DNA and chromosomal damage in human cells and it heightens the risk of non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma. The time is ripe for EPA to tighten control of this pervasive but hazardous chemical. 🐾

## Otters and Ice

by Ron Payne

Early this April, Craig Zondag and I engaged in a morning reconnaissance at East Creek Wildlife Management Area in Orwell. The idea was to learn what birds might be around when we came back later in the evening to give a lesson in birding to Cub Scout Pack 108.

We walked out on the short causeway and began scanning for waterfowl in the impoundment. Suddenly Craig said, “Is that an otter on the ice over there?” And sure enough, there was a river otter not 20 meters away, lying on the ice eating a bullhead. When we had approached, Craig had thought it was a log on the ice. Distracted by other birds, I had passed it off as a pair of Black Ducks to be looked at later.

Soon after we noticed it, the otter hopped off the ice and dove under the water, leaving most of its meal behind for a Ring-billed Gull. We presumed we had spooked it, and I felt a bit bad about disturbing its breakfast, but a few minutes later it emerged again, munching on another fish. It certainly had taken notice of us, though, because shortly thereafter it began swimming back and forth in front of



Otters picnicking on the ice at East Creek

photo by Craig Zondag

us, eyeing us and making a “barking” call that sounded much like a dog’s squeaky toy.

The most interesting part of this encounter came when we heard a cracking noise in front of us and saw that the otter had punched a hole in the 3-mm thick ice with its head to stare us down and bark at us from a closer vantage point. About this time a second otter appeared, joining the first in catching bullhead. They swam and lounged on the ice together throughout the rest of our time there.

Later in the evening when we returned with the Scouts, the ice was gone and the otters with it, but the Scouts enjoyed our story of what we had seen that morning while they looked through our spotting scopes at birds. 🐾

### Let’s Go Birding!

Calling all nature enthusiasts—it’s time to enjoy a summer birding adventure! On Saturday, June 20<sup>th</sup>, Otter Creek Audubon and Middlebury Area Land Trust will once again offer a beginning bird walk through several of Wright Park’s diverse habitats. Small groups led by experienced naturalists will walk along the Quest Trail, a loop off the Trail Around Middlebury. We’ll explore a managed shrubland, a variety of forest types, wetlands, beaver habitats and the banks of Otter Creek. We will listen for birdsong, watch for nesting behaviors, breathe plenty of fresh air and enjoy whatever natural wonders come our way. There will be a surprise discovery station, as well as the traditional snack stop for any hungry hikers.

Please join us for this annual adventure! Bring your binoculars, or borrow a pair from OCAS. The walk is family-friendly and suitable for all ages, but not appropriate for strollers and wheelchairs. We will meet at 9:00 AM at the Wright Park parking lot north of Pulp Mill Covered Bridge on Seymour St. Extension (northwest from the Middlebury Green on Seymour Street, then just before Pulp Mill covered bridge turn right on Seymour Street Extension to parking area at end). The walk ends by about 11:00 AM. We will go rain or shine, but if you have questions call 989-7115. 🐾

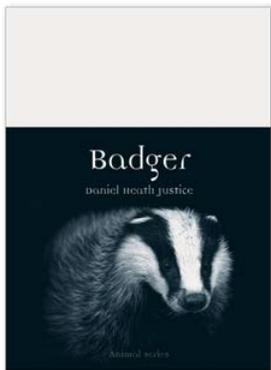
### Winter Food Chain

by Gary Solomon

It’s amazing to me what a bag of sunflower seeds can attract over the course of the winter. The simple answer is birds but it is more complex than that. The freeloading starts as soon as the feeder is hung with the chickadees, nuthatches, Blue Jays, and woodpeckers providing a base activity for the remainder of the winter. But as the movie title *What Lies Beneath* suggests, the constantly spilled seed lures a bevy of winter ground feeders, including voles, moles, and mice, as well as squirrels (both on the ground and on the feeder). As the winter and the snow depth deepen, natural food sources becomes scarcer and scarcer, which tends to concentrate those coming to feed from that bag of sunflower seeds dangling invitingly. Foxes stop by occasionally now to see which careless subnivians might reveal themselves through noise beneath the snow or red squirrels looking down for seed instead of around for predators. Equally near the top of this food chain is the Barred Owl, who sits sunning itself just feet from the bird feeder to find either breakfast or supper moving about below. And finally (and the point of this article), the bears will shortly be out of their dens, very hungry, very opportunistic, and more than willing to eat bird seed out of feeders or below them. You know spring has come when your bird feeder has gone. So end the free loading and take the temptation away. 🐾



Craig Zondag keeping the tigers away at Wright Park. photo by Carol Ramsayer



### Book Review:

## Badger

By Daniel Heath Justice

224 pages, Reaktion Books, 2014.

Review by Diana Carter

Canadian author and environmental activist Daniel Heath Justice has just come out with a book called *Badger*, illustrated with 60 color plates and numerous drawings, detailing the fascinating lives of the

world's several species of badger and their role in both natural and human history.

### Some Things You Need To Know About Badgers:

- ❧ They are nocturnal, shy and reclusive creatures, diggers of tunnels. But you won't find any in Vermont, since the North American badger has migrated east in the U.S. only as far as Ohio.
- ❧ Badgers live underground in the tunnels they dig, and a network of their tunnels is called a "sett". Families of Eurasian badgers have been known to inhabit the same burrow system for thousands of years.
- ❧ Different species have different diets. Some are carnivorous, some omnivorous. One badger can eat hundreds of

earthworms a night, and nearly all can consume rodents and snakes. A popular YouTube video, "The Crazy Nastyass Honey Badger", shows a honey badger snatching a rodent from the mouth of a cobra and then eating the cobra.

- ❧ The badger lives quietly until attacked. When provoked he will fight back, often fighting off animals much larger than itself, including wolves. The badger's reputation as a fierce defensive fighter is deserved—it can survive the bite of the poisonous puff adder, a snake which can kill a lion twenty times the weight of a badger.
- ❧ So thick-skinned that when it invades a beehive for a meal of larvae it feels nothing from the attacking swarm, the badger also can wiggle in that same skin so loosely that it is able to turn around and attack a grasping predator.
- ❧ The word "badgering", meaning tormenting or nagging, refers not to the badger but to dogs in the cruel English blood sport of badger baiting, where trained dogs attacked trapped badgers and often killed them. Now outlawed in England, badger baiting nevertheless persists.

Daniel Heath Justice is donating all royalties from his book *Badger* to the Nature Conservancy of Canada to protect critically endangered badger habitat. For the pleasure of both reading his book and knowing that its proceeds may help to preserve the badger in North America, I highly recommend *Badger*. ❧

## Blackpolls' Daring Migratory Flight

Based on circumstantial evidence, ornithologists have long assumed that Blackpoll Warblers migrate directly over the Atlantic from northeastern North America to the Caribbean. Almost all other eastern North American songbirds take a longer, more time consuming but safer route along the east coast.

Now, thanks to miniaturized light-level geolocators, researchers from the Vermont Center for Ecostudies and other groups have generated incontrovertible evidence that Blackpolls take the overwater route south. Further, they cover the 1500 miles nonstop in two to three days, stopping in the Greater Antilles for a night before heading on to Venezuela and Colombia.

The geolocators, which weigh only half a gram and which 12-gram Blackpolls can carry in a backpack, must be recovered to learn where the birds carrying them have been. Of 20 Blackpolls outfitted in Vermont and 20 in Nova Scotia, three and two respectively were captured close to the sites of original capture, producing enough of a sample size to leave no doubt that they take the quick, risky overwater route. They return in the northern spring along the east coast. Apparently, the risk is only worth taking on the southerly route. ❧



## Neonicotinoid Moratorium

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) announced a moratorium on new bee- and bird-harming neonicotinoid pesticides on 2 April 2015. The moratorium follows petitions signed by over four million Americans calling on the Obama administration to institute strong protections for bees and other pollinators whose populations are dwindling. Unfortunately, the action ignores the very large number of neonicotinoid pesticides already in use.

In contrast to the EPA, Lowe's Home Improvement responded to public protest by announcing a phase-out of neonicotinoids in shelf products and plants to be completed by spring 2019, as suitable alternatives become available. Lowe's will promote in-store consumer education materials, as well as promoting use of biological controls and integrated pest management and will require supplying nurseries to disclose the amount of pesticide they use per acre.

Research studies assembled by the Task Force on Systemic Pesticides showed neonicotinoids to be a primary cause of decline in bees and to contribute to declines in birds, earthworms, butterflies and other wildlife. The next step in protecting pollinators will be for the EPA to take action to phase out the numerous neonicotinoids approved for use on agricultural crops and nursery plants that are already responsible for the widespread decline of pollinators. ❧

## OCAS Calendar of Events May – June 2015

**MONDAY, MAY 4**                    **OTTER CREEK AUDUBON**  
**THRU MONDAY MAY 18**      **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 spe-  
cies or a lump-sum amount. See insert, this issue.

**SUNDAY, MAY 10,**                **MOTHER’S DAY WARBLER WARM-**  
**7:30–10:30 AM**                    **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.

**SUNDAY, JUNE 14**                **CANOE TRIP** in Missisquoi  
National Wildlife Refuge, Swanton  
VT. Pre-registration required by Sunday, 7 June. A 7-mile  
round trip paddle to Vermont’s largest Great Blue Heron  
rookery at the Missisquoi River mouth. Trip limited to 8  
canoes or kayaks. Meet at 8 AM at Shaw’s Market parking  
area in Middlebury for 1.5-hour drive to refuge. Bring canoe  
or kayak, paddles, life vests, water, bag lunch and beverage,  
raingear, sunscreen, insect repellent, binoculars. To pre-reg-  
ister contact Ron Payne at 388-6019, kinglet@together.net.

**SATURDAY, JUNE 20**            **BEGINNERS BIRD WALK.** Jointly  
**9–11 AM**                            sponsored with MALT at Wright  
Park. Led by experienced natural-  
ists. Meet at Wright Park. Call Carol Ramsayer at 989-7115  
for further information. See article, this issue.

### 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.

**SATURDAY, MAY 9, 7-9 AM**  
**SATURDAY, JUNE 13, 7-9 AM**  
**SATURDAY, JULY 11, 7-9 AM**  
**SATURDAY, AUGUST 8, 7-9 AM**  
**SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 12, 7-9 AM**

## Announcing the 2015 Environmental Education Grant Recipients

Every January, OCAS offers Addison County teachers the  
opportunity to apply for its Environmental Education Grants.  
Applicants are encouraged to design nature-based experiences  
for their students, such as field trips or outside presentations.  
This year the OCAS grants committee was very pleased with the  
enthusiastic response from educators. Although the \$4,887 total  
requested exceeded our budget, we are happy to announce that  
\$2730 was granted to ten excellent projects. The funds will sup-  
port teachers’ programs in 8 Addison County public and private  
schools, as well as one homeschool family. About 453 children  
will benefit from the outdoor enrichment activities developed by  
their teachers.

This spring students will be engaged in outdoor learning  
made possible at least in part with these OCAS funds. All chil-  
dren in Cornwall Elementary School and Salisbury Community  
School will see live raptors brought from VINS to their respec-  
tive schools. Orwell Village School sixth graders will travel to the  
Lake Champlain Maritime Museum where they will paddle their  
canoes to collect and test water samples, learning first-hand about  
water ecology. Teachers at the Quarry Hill School will plant bird-  
friendly shrubs and build bluebird boxes to attract more wildlife  
to their pre-schoolers’ play yard. Rodney Olsen’s Diversified  
Occupations students will work side-by-side with ornitholo-  
gists, expanding their bird banding skills and studying migrat-  
ing birds at the Braddock Bay Bird Observatory near Rochester,  
New York. During an overnight at Common Ground, Vergennes  
Union Elementary School sixth graders will study natural history  
and ecology and observe the night sky through telescopes. From  
Weybridge Elementary School, Catherine Canavan’s fourth and  
fifth graders will travel to the Birds of Vermont Museum and  
Green Mountain Audubon for a day of nature study.

Additional outdoor learning is planned for the fall. Weybridge  
Elementary School will engage in a school-wide project led by  
teacher Joy Dobson to explore how birds use engineering prin-  
ciples in nest building. Also, a homeschool family will use OCAS  
loaner binoculars for seasonal nature study on the Trail Around  
Middlebury. A year-long grant to Robinson Elementary School  
allows Four Winds to bring their natural history program to all  
students in that school.

Along with funding, OCAS supports many of these teacher-  
designed projects by providing volunteers to assist. Several OCAS  
members will lead bird walks and offer hands-on activities in  
advance of the Weybridge trip to Birds of Vermont Museum.  
Others will present an owl pellet dissection program in prepara-  
tion for the VINS visit to Salisbury. OCAS members will teach  
binocular use to the homeschool family and pre-schoolers at  
Quarry Hill School, then follow up with guided bird walks.

OCAS heartily applauds the excellent work of these Addison  
County teachers as they strive to provide their students with  
exceptional outdoor learning experiences. If you would like to  
contribute to OCAS’ Environmental Education Grants, a good  
opportunity is the OCAS Birdathon, described in a special insert  
in this issue. 🐾

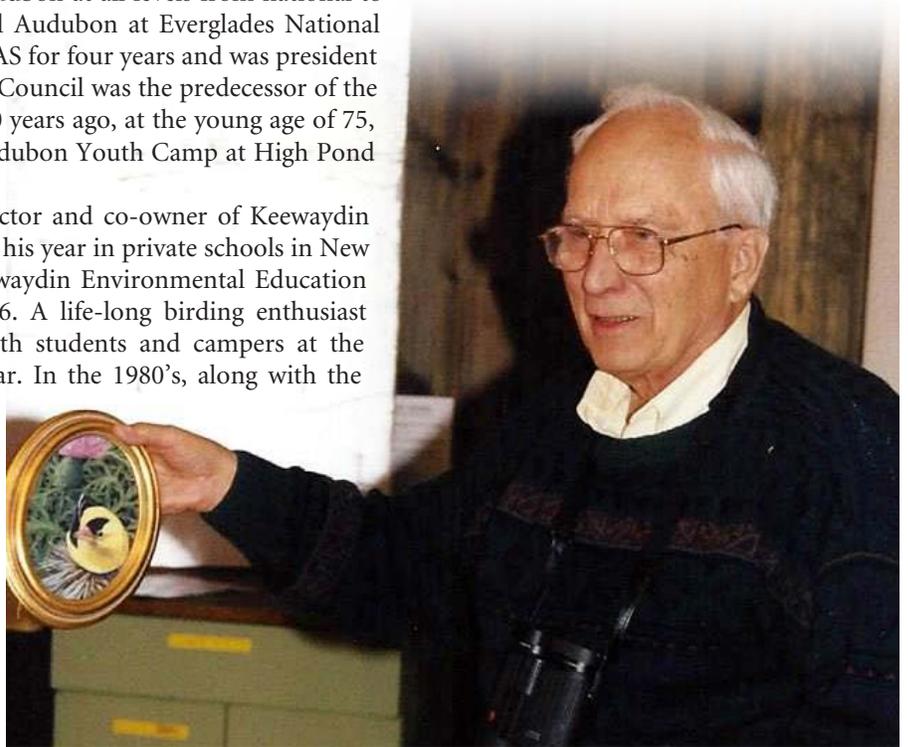
## In Memorium: Abbott T. Fenn

**A**bbott Fenn died in his sleep on April 3<sup>rd</sup> 2015, at age 93.

Abbott had a long involvement with Audubon at all levels from national to chapter. Decades ago, he led trips for National Audubon at Everglades National Park. Here in Vermont, he was president of OCAS for four years and was president of the Vermont Audubon Council for two. The Council was the predecessor of the current Vermont Audubon Assembly. Nearly 20 years ago, at the young age of 75, Abbott started and helped run the Vermont Audubon Youth Camp at High Pond in Brandon.

For 40 years, Abbott was the Associate Director and co-owner of Keewaydin Camps on Lake Dunmore and taught the rest of his year in private schools in New England. He co-founded and directed the Keewaydin Environmental Education Center from 1973 until his retirement in 1986. A life-long birding enthusiast and committed educator, he banded birds with students and campers at the summer camp as well as during the school year. In the 1980's, along with the OCAS board, he organized wildlife festivals for three years at Keewaydin, a precursor to Dead Creek Wildlife Day. He received the Vermont State award of the New England Environmental Education Alliance in 1986, the Silver Feather award from OCAS in 1996 (the second year it was awarded) and the Middlebury College Citizen's Award in 2004.

Audubon has lost a good friend, but we are all the richer for his dedication over the years. 🐾



Abbott Fenn at High Pond Vermont Audubon Youth Camp. photo from Audubon Vermont files

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