



# Otter Tracks

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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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Vol 41, No. 3

www.ottercreekaudubon.org

Printed on 100% recycled paper

## David Sibley Visits Vermont

by Gary Starr



OCAS Education Chair Carol Ramsayer with David Sibley.  
Photo by John Meakin

David Sibley, renowned author of *The Sibley Guide to Birds*, the best-selling birding field guide in the U.S., gave a talk in Burlington on June 26<sup>th</sup> and participated in a bird walk in Huntington and Hinesburg led by Jim Shallow on June 27<sup>th</sup> as a guest of Audubon Vermont. His talk was titled: "The Psychology of Bird Identification—or—How to Mistake an Egret for a Shrike."

Several Otter Creek Audubon board members posed with Sibley after his talk.

The crux of the talk was how our expectations and perspectives can alter what we think we are seeing in the field. David showed us how in fact he mistook a Great Egret for a Loggerhead Shrike at Cape May. This brings to mind the definition of the difference between an expert and a beginning birder: the expert has misidentified more birds.

On Saturday morning, a group of birders met at the Green Mountain Audubon Center in Huntington for a fascinating morning of birding. Audubon Vermont staff Jim Shallow and Mark LaBarr led the walk in their home territory; David Sibley added substantial insight at every turn. Two themes came to mind during the walk:

• David Sibley is a font of information on every bird in the area including: variable plumage, migration, mating habits, nest construction and habitat. One five-minute educational session was about the nest-

ing habits and preferences of the Brown Creeper. In this setting David was able to expound on some of his acquired knowledge not included in his books because of limited space.

• Get to know your local birds. Although many of us have large life lists, it is fascinating to focus on the common birds.



Mark LaBarr with Chestnut-sided Warbler  
Photo by Audubon Vermont

The two events provided a wonderful opportunity for Vermont birders to learn from one of the great American birders. Being with a person who is engrossed in a subject and is willing to share his knowledge is special. Thank you, Audubon Vermont, for bringing us this event. •

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## Bee Problems Get Political

Editorial by  
**Warren King**



# VIEWPOINT

**N**eonicotinoids (neonics, for short) kill honeybees, bumblebees, monarchs and other butterflies, seed-eating birds and many other pollinators. Their use was banned in European Union countries in 2013. In April 2015 the U.S. EPA imposed a moratorium on new neonics, but EPA has turned a blind eye to the use of the 500 previously approved members of this major class of pesticides.

In March 2015 a group of 28 farming, environmental and food safety organizations wrote the Inspector General of the U.S. Department of Agriculture to express concern that at least 10 Department of Agriculture scientists conducting research on neonics have been censored or suppressed. One of the scientists was quoted as saying: "Your words are changed, your papers are censored or edited, or you are not allowed to submit them at all." Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility filed a legal petition with the U.S. Department of Agriculture requesting rule revision to increase job protection for government scientists, some of whom are afraid they will be laid off and will find it impossible to find new jobs.

The Obama administration's National Pollinator Health Strategy released in May failed to address the role of pesticide-coated seeds, including neonics, in pollinator decline. At the same time an international group of independent scientists conducted a meta-analysis of 1121 peer-reviewed studies showing that neonics affect whole ecosystems from soil microbes to earthworms, reptiles and birds. U.S. EPA's review of the effects of neonics promised by the Pollinator Health Strategy won't appear until 2017.

Neonics are persistent and systemic. They penetrate plant tissue, so they can't be washed away. To dramatize the extent of their presence, American Bird Conservancy biologists visited the congressional cafeterias and took samples of a cross-section of hot and cold foods. These were tested by the Harvard School of Public Health for the presence of seven widely used neonics. They revealed their presence in 91 percent of the food items sampled. Even though below harmful thresholds, the near universal presence of neonics in congressional food emphasized the nature of the problem.

Government foot-dragging and censorship of scientists leads to a suspicion that the agrochemical companies responsible for neonics have greater political clout than the many individual voices of protest raised against neonics' use. Are we seeing a replay of the strategy used by big corporations to sow doubt and obscure the truth in the past with issues like tobacco smoke, DDT use, acid rain, the ozone hole and climate change? This strategy has worked all too effectively several times. Why not once more? It's only our food supply and healthy ecosystems in jeopardy. 🐾



## Audubon Continues Partnership with VELCO in Shrubland Survey

By Margaret Fowle, Audubon Vermont

For the fourth 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) from West Rutland to Williston. Fifteen teams of observers from Rutland County Audubon, Otter Creek Audubon and Green Mountain Audubon chapters participated in the 2015 survey, which targeted VELCO focus areas with previously documented Golden-winged Warblers, Blue-winged Warblers, or a hybrid of the two species.

Audubon observer teams scoured their assigned VELCO routes once during the survey period from late May to late June. Eastern Towhee and Field Sparrow were the most common target species observed on the VELCO routes each year (see table). Nearly 90 percent of the birds observed were found in the southern and wider portion of the ROW, from West Rutland to New Haven.

Audubon Vermont has compared the bird locations to management practices

used by VELCO and developed recommendations to enhance the shrubland bird habitat within the ROW. VELCO ROWs are managed every 4 years. 2015 begins the next management cycle for the bulk of the survey area.

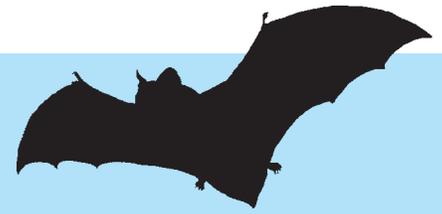
The VELCO survey is part of Audubon Vermont's larger effort to enhance shrubland bird habitat in the Champlain Valley. In 2014, Audubon staff and chapter volunteers surveyed previously identified habitats for Golden- and Blue-winged Warblers. In 2015, much of the follow-up effort for this work focused on collaborating with landowners in the "winged" warbler hotspots, either through follow-up surveys, discussions of management options and strategies, or post-management surveys.

Audubon Program Director Mark LaBarr will present the results of the VELCO survey and the collaboration with Audubon chapters and VELCO at the Environmental Concerns in Right-of-Way Management Symposium in Nova Scotia in September 2015. 🦇

### Results of VELCO Survey, 2012-2015

| Species                   | Number Observed 2012 | Number Observed 2013 | Number Observed 2014* | Number Observed 2015* |
|---------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Golden-winged Warbler     | 7                    | 8                    | 12                    | 7                     |
| Blue-winged Warbler       | 13                   | 16                   | 11                    | 10                    |
| Golden/Blue-winged Hybrid | 1                    | 3                    | 8                     | 15                    |
| Prairie Warbler           | 19                   | 22                   | 19                    | 33                    |
| Eastern Towhee            | 66                   | 90                   | 69                    | 93                    |
| Field Sparrow             | 65                   | 78                   | 39                    | 60                    |
| Brown Thrasher            | 10                   | 5                    | 5                     | 1                     |
| American Woodcock         | 1                    | 1                    | 0                     | 0                     |
| Brown-headed Cowbird      | n/a                  | 50                   | 18                    | 32                    |
| <b>Total Individuals</b>  | <b>182</b>           | <b>273</b>           | <b>181</b>            | <b>251</b>            |

\* Preliminary results for 2015; not all sites surveyed in 2014 or 2015



### Promising Treatment for Bats with White-nose Syndrome

Bats of several species have plummeted in number in the past ten years due to a cold-loving infection from the fungus *Pseudogymnoascus destructans*, White-nosed Syndrome (WNS) for short. WNS has accounted for the loss of about 5.7 million bats in eastern North America, mostly of species that hibernate close together in caves or mines. In Vermont the little brown bat, northern long-eared bat and tri-colored bat joined Indiana bat as endangered as the result of an emergency listing several years ago. Eastern small-footed bat was listed as threatened in Vermont at the same time.

WNS affects these species while they hibernate by causing dehydration, which awakens the bats prematurely, resulting in exhaustion of their fat reserves well before the arrival of spring. They emerge from their hibernacula to fall victim to starvation and the cold.

Bats of several species in Europe have developed relative immunity to WNS. In North America WNS infection was introduced, possibly from Europe, only a decade ago. It is too soon for North American bats to have developed immunity, although there is evidence of stabilization in numbers, at much reduced rates, in some colonies in New York and Vermont.

In 2012 researchers from Georgia State University treated 15 bats with a common bacterium that prevents mold from growing on bananas and other fruit, and released the bats into the Mark Twain Cave Complex in Hannibal, Missouri. The treated bats survived better and put on more weight than untreated bats. Treating large numbers of free-flying bats is a problem not yet overcome, but at least the treatment is effective on a limited basis. 🦇



**A Gray Catbird looks in on a group of bird-watchers at "Let's Go Birding!"**  
 photo by Gary Starr

The morning couldn't have been more beautiful for the June 20<sup>th</sup> walk in Middlebury's Wright Park. With the azure sky, no wind and temperatures in the 60s, about 25 folks gathered to enjoy finding early summer birds. This was "Let's Go Birding!", the fifth annual guided walk for beginning birders, organized by Otter Creek Audubon and Middlebury Area Land Trust. Its goal was to offer people of all ages a chance to enjoy birds and whatever other wonders of nature might come along.

With binoculars at the ready, three groups of nature enthusiasts set off along different segments of the Quest Trail, an offshoot of the Trail Around Middlebury (TAM). An experienced birder and an able assistant led each group, thus allowing the groups to be small. To experience a variety of habitats, they explored a pine forest, a managed shrubland, a hardwood forest and a marsh. They crossed small streams and walked within view of Otter Creek. Gnawed stumps and branches gave clues of past beaver activity, and lush ferns reminded walkers of the generous spring rains. Ovenbirds adamantly announced their presence, and catbirds meowed from the understory.

As per tradition, there were discovery stops along the way. Earlier, Craig had perched various wooden birds in trailside trees. Now birders had to find them and identify them based only on their silhouettes. Katherine manned the snack station, passing out gorp and pistachios to hungry hikers. Along another trail, Carol and Theresa offered a learning station displaying different types of feathers. And at the end of the morning there was watermelon and drinks back at the parking lot provided by Carl and his family.

Our thanks go out to the six OCAS and MALT leaders who shared their knowledge of nature with the enthusiastic participants. Ron, Craig, Josh, Jim, Gary and Kathy all made the morning a success by answering questions and pointing out the many treasures that a walk in Wright Park has to offer. A self-guided brochure available at the parking lot allows folks to return at any time of the year to enjoy this beautiful natural area on the edge of Middlebury. 🐾



**Carol Ramsayer leads a discussion about feathers at "Let's Go Birding!"**  
 photo by Gary Starr

## 2015 Otter Creek Audubon Birdathon

OCAS' major fundraiser of the year is our birdathon. Teams of birders, this year five teams, identify as many species of birds as possible within a 24-hour period on a date of each team's choosing in the first half of June. All teams recruit sponsors who pledge a lump sum or a per spe-

cies amount. We use our birdathon funds to run our education program, of which we're justifiably proud. This year we identified a combined total of 126 species. Less common finds this year included a flock of Bonaparte's Gulls, Black-billed Cuckoo, Eastern Whippoorwill, Merlin, Brown

Creeper, Tennessee Warbler, Orchard Oriole and Pine Siskin.

Look for the special insert in next May's *Otter Tracks* to help you support your favorite team in their quest for species. 🐾



## OCAS Calendar of Events September 2015 - January 2016

**SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 20 11 AM-2 PM**     **HAWK WATCH AT BUCK MOUNTAIN,** Waltham. Meet at 10:30 a.m. at Vergennes Park and Ride, junction of Routes 22A and 7, Vergennes, or at 11 at the trailhead on Route 66. Carpool to Route 66 if possible; parking there is very limited. 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 3 9:30 AM-4 PM**     **DEAD CREEK WILDLIFE DAY.** Call 802/241-3700 for information. See the schedule of events in the insert, this issue.

**THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 12 5:30-8:45 PM**     **OCAS ANNUAL DINNER AND MEETING.** The speaker is Jim Andrews, compiler of *The Vermont Reptile and Amphibian Atlas*, compiler of the Middlebury Area Christmas Bird Count along with his wife Kris, experienced lecturer and field biologist, recipient in 1997 of OCAS Silver Feather and speaker at OCAS' annual dinner in 1998. Reservations needed for dinner at 6. No fee for talk at 7:45. 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*)

**SATURDAY, DECEMBER 19**     **FERRISBURGH CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT.** Call Mike Winslow at 877-6586 for details.

**SATURDAY, DECEMBER 19**     **MT. ABE CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT.** Call Randy or Cathy Durand at 453-4370 for details.

**SUNDAY, DECEMBER 20**     **MIDDLEBURY CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT.** Call Jim or Kris Andrews at 352-4734 for details.

**SATURDAY, JANUARY 2**     **HINESBURG CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT:** Call Paul Wieszoreck at 802-434-4216 for details.

### 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, SEPTEMBER 12, 8-10 AM**

**SATURDAY, OCTOBER 10, 8-10 AM**

**SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 8-10 AM**

**SATURDAY, DECEMBER 12, 8-10 AM**

## Avian Early Warning System

If you've spent time in the woods or at a feeder, you realize that Black-capped Chickadees communicate with their song "phoebe, phoebe" to defend their territory or attract a mate, and their call "chick-a-dee,dee,dee" to establish contact with flockmates and "other purposes". Recent research has shed remarkable light on those "other purposes".

Chickadees add extra "dees" to the chick-a-dee to accentuate a warning of a nearby owl or other raptor to attract flockmates and other birds to lend a hand to "mob" the owl, making the owl's presence obvious to all would-be prey and encouraging the owl to depart.

But wait. There's more to this. More "dees" greet a Screech Owl or a Northern Shrike than a Great Horned Owl. The Screech Owl is small enough to match the chickadee's maneuverability. The Great Horned Owl is not, so the Screech Owl's presence poses a greater threat to a chickadee. Not only chickadees are listening, though. Larger birds, say Blue Jays or Cardinals, are listening, and they comprehend the size differences inherent in the chickadee's call and the resultant increase in risk they face with a larger predator. The level of threat interpreted by the chickadees goes beyond smaller and larger. A largish bird like a Bobwhite elicits no response from a chickadee, since a granivore poses no threat whatever.

Now the plot thickens. Chickadees and most other songbirds, and even squirrels and chipmunks, have an additional vocalization, a "seet" that they, and we, can hear but that raptors cannot. The "seet" call functions as a warning of an approaching raptor in the air. It triggers initial silence as other birds near enough to the source pick up the signal, then a wave of "seets" as the birds along the raptor's path dive for cover. The "seet" is a universal warning used by would-be prey of almost any size.

A recent study in Montana deployed microphones along a trail in the woods to document what happens following that initial "seet". The wave of silence, the responding "seet", and the dive for cover move through the woods at up to 120 mph and up to a half-mile from the source "seet", fast enough to outrun the swiftest raptor. 🐾

# Fourteenth Annual Dead Creek Wildlife Day

Saturday, October 3, 2015

**D**ead Creek Wildlife Day brings you Vermont's most capable presenters of natural history information on a wide variety of topics. A feature this year will be a wild game cook off with free samples. Also, learn about bear habits from an experienced biologist, and find out from an expert if Canada lynx once again inhabits Vermont woodlands. The whole family will enjoy the live Wild Critters of Vermont up close to learn about their adaptations for survival. 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.

The banders of the Dead Creek Bird Observatory will be at the Route 17 Dead Creek bridge boat launch from 7 a.m. 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. Healthy lunch selections and snacks will be offered 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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