



# Otter Tracks

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**20th Annual  
Great Backyard  
Bird Count**

**February 17-20, 2017**

Golden-crowned Kinglet. Photo: Nick Saunders/GBBC



**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 2017 Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) takes place Friday, February 17 through Monday, February 20. The GBBC has integrated coverage with eBird to provide global coverage. It's easy to participate 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 [BirdCount.org](http://BirdCount.org) and click on Get Started. You'll find downloadable instructions to create your free account, to enter your observations, and to learn about other opportunities. 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. There's a tally sheet inserted in this issue, but remember you need to create your GBBC account to report sightings. Your records help provide 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 [birdcount.org](http://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 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, look into participating in Project FeederWatch by going to [feederwatch.org](http://feederwatch.org).

# Otter Creek Audubon Society

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## Which Bird Migrates Farthest?

Editorial by  
Warren King



## VIEWPOINT

The length and success of bird migration depends on a number of things including stopover sites, feeding sites, breeding and overwintering locations and the size of the migrant. We are learning new information about migration every year.

For decades, leg bands, which birds as small as hummingbirds wear with impunity, have provided records of the straight-line distance between the site where a bird was banded and subsequent sites where the bird was recaptured, which occasionally coincides with the start and end of its migration. More recently, satellite tags provide more precise route information. The lightest ones, presently 5 grams (a gram equals three paperclips), can be carried by large shorebirds and even some medium-sized songbirds, but not small shorebirds or songbirds. These tags transmit precise location data for the duration of the battery or solar cell power supply, and do not require that the birds be recaptured.

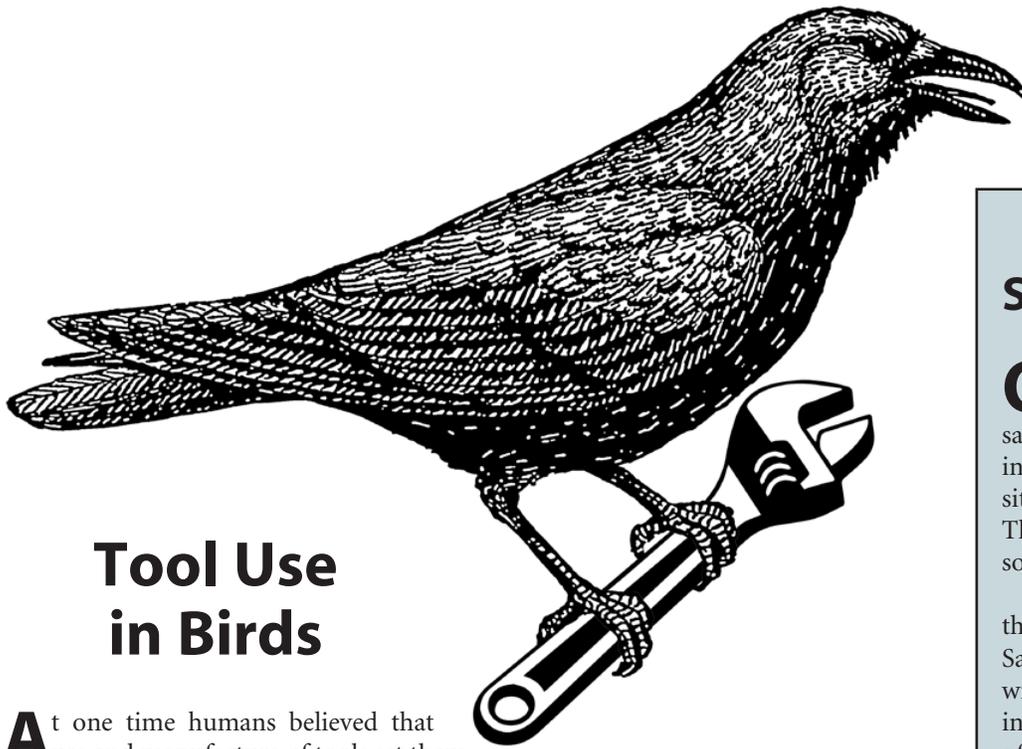
A new development, light-level geolocators, can be made as light as 0.3 ounces, one paperclip. They work well on warblers and other small birds, but the information they carry cannot be transmitted. Consequently, the bird must be recaptured before information on its whereabouts becomes known. These techniques are revolutionizing the level of information available to ornithologists about the details of migration. We can look forward to a huge flow of data as these new procedures answer questions about precise migratory routes, timing, and habitat requirements.

Arctic Terns are frequently considered the longest migrants. They fly from subarctic or temperate breeding sites in the northern hemisphere to the Southern Ocean and back again, up to 44,000 miles annually. A 30-year-old Arctic Tern will have traveled 1.5 million miles, three trips to the moon and back. Arctic Terns take their time migrating, foraging for fish as they go, resting on the surface as they need to. They leave their nesting areas upon fledging their young and take an extended, sometimes zigzag route to the Southern Ocean where they spend the southern summer. The zigzag allows them to avoid headwinds.

But for shorebirds oceanic migration is a different matter. They are unable to rest on the water or feed in flight. Although some long-distance migrating shorebirds rest on islands, some species head nonstop for their ultimate destination or a distant staging area. A Bar-tailed Godwit, nearly crow-sized, recorded the most dramatic flight in 2007. It flew from New Zealand 6,340 miles to a wetland on the North Korea-China border and then 3000 miles further to Alaska. Its return journey in the northern autumn was from Alaska 7,145 miles nonstop to New Zealand, averaging 35 miles per hour, flying at heights between 1.9 and 2.5 miles, the longest nonstop flight currently on record.

In 2014 a Pacific Golden Plover, considerably smaller than a Bar-tailed Godwit, flew 5,500 miles nonstop over an eight-day period from the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta in Alaska, avoiding a storm near Hawaii, to Okinawa. It rested and fed for 26 days and ultimately flew on to Sulawesi, Indonesia. The return flight to its breeding grounds went through Hong Kong, Shanghai, northeastern China to Nome, Alaska, a round trip of 16,777 miles. The researcher who documented the Golden Plover flight believes that some Golden Plovers regularly make nonstop 6,800-mile migratory jumps from Alaska to Queensland, Australia. Sharp-tailed Sandpipers and Ruddy Turnstones, each somewhat smaller than a Golden Plover, may make similar flights.

The use of smaller and smaller devices will permit documentation of actual routes traveled, something we'll be hearing about in the next few years. Songbird migration lengths are not likely to exceed the extraordinary distances racked up by shorebirds, but knowing the distance, the timing, and the actual locations of migration will be a significant step in developing life-cycle conservation strategies for these species. And, of course, this topic leads directly to how birds find their way over vast distances. More about this later. 🐾



## Tool Use in Birds

**A**t one time humans believed that use and manufacture of tools set them apart from all other species. However, the list of other species that use tools now includes several other mammals as well as many bird species. A few of them manufacture tools as well. Not surprisingly, the avian family Corvidae, the ravens, crows, jays and relatives, sits atop the bird list, since they are believed to be the peak of intelligence in the avian world.

The New Caledonian Crow, which has been studied at length in a laboratory in England, manufactures tools from a variety of materials to extract food from crevices. They even use materials like wire not occurring in nature. Herons of various species in Japan and North America and Asia's Black Kite are known to attract fish with crackers or bread pinched from nearby picnickers. The herons remove their bait when a fish too large to eat shows interest.

Stretching the term "tool" slightly expands the number of tool users even more, to include gulls, at least three species, which drop clams onto paved roads to open the shells. Several bird species drop nuts on paved roads, where passing cars become unwitting nutcrackers. The Egyptian Vulture in Africa drops rocks on large eggs to open them.

Bernd Heinrich in *Mind of the Raven* [1999, Chapter 26], writes of ravens that learn from one another in a cage. They learn to use their bill to haul up a string

with meat attached, stepping on the string to keep the meat from dropping, then grabbing hold of the string again with their bill to raise the meat another few inches, repeating until the meat is captured.

Close to home, American Robins occasionally use twigs to sweep leaves away to afford a better view of lawn invertebrates for dinner. Brown-headed Nuthatches in the southern U.S. use bark flakes to pry other flakes away from tree trunks to expose invertebrates.

In Australia Palm Cockatoo males beat on a hollow tree with a stick as an auditory and visual display to convince a prospective mate they have that tree, and presumably neighboring trees, under their control as potential food sources. In Madagascar male Vasa Parrots grind shells with a pebble. The resulting calcium powder is apparently passed to their mates, who ingest the powder as an aid in generating sturdy eggshells.

Also in Australia and only recently reported, a burning branch becomes a tool in the talons of Brown Falcons and Black Kites. The raptors carry the branch to a nearby unburned patch of ground to extend the flames to new terrain where reptilian or mammalian prey is likely to be flushed. Researchers have reported this behavior secondhand a number of times; it is common knowledge to Australian natives. 🐾

## Sign Up for 2017 Salamander Escorts

**O**n warm, wet nights from mid-March to mid-April frogs and salamanders move from their wintering sites on high ground to breeding sites in wetlands to mate and lay eggs. Their route to the nearest vernal pool sometimes takes them across a road.

This is the fourteenth spring that Otter Creek Audubon and the Salisbury Conservation Commission will patrol an amphibian crossing site in Salisbury. Across Vermont, groups of concerned individuals attempt to alter amphibians' lethal odds by moving them off the road during nights of significant movement. At the most dangerous crossings the amphibians may suffer 50 percent mortality, but the crossing we monitor has little traffic. 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. The site affords all who participate an opportunity to experience this remarkable natural phenomenon at first hand.

You can witness and help perpetuate this migration if you sign up for the 2017 amphibian email alert. 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 8:15 pm and can run for several hours. Volunteers may 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 species identification tips and a reminder of appropriate behavior. With your help we'll record the numbers of each species we move for two hours. Sign up at [kinglet@together.net](mailto:kinglet@together.net) even if you were on the list in another year. 🐾

# Evening Grosbeaks: Here Today, Gone Tomorrow?

Those of us who have tended platform feeders in the Northeast going back to the late 1960s and through the late 1980s have memories of large flocks of Evening Grosbeaks. They overwhelmed our feeders daily, making it a challenge for other platform feeder birds to squeeze in for a sunflower seed or two. We referred to them as “those pushy grosbeaks” or other less charitable descriptors. But we reveled in the wild display of movement, noise and color they brought, little knowing or caring that the display had no precedent in the East, and that it would end as dramatically as it began.

To see an Evening Grosbeak in Audubon’s day you had to go west at least as far as Michigan. A slow, massive movement east began by the 1850s. By the 1930s the first Evening Grosbeaks had reached Northern New England. The movement east was in response to the fairly rapid abundance of two food sources, box elder and pin cherry. Box elder, like the Evening Grosbeak, was originally a midwest and western species, brought east to stabilize the soil in places where heavy cutting had occurred. Pin cherry and its relatives, black and choke cherry, benefitted from the extensive clearing of northeast-

ern forest tracts from 1850 to 1950. Pin cherry seeds remain viable in the soil for a century or longer. Among the first trees to take advantage of bare ground, they thrived when fires followed clearcuts. It’s not called fire cherry for nothing.

Once Evening Grosbeaks arrived in the Northeast they helped themselves to an apparent limitless supply of sunflower seeds at bird feeders. And for those Evening Grosbeaks that remained east, repeated outbreaks of spruce budworms between the 1960s and the 1980s provided an abundance of summertime food ideal for the nestlings and adults alike.

Although we’ve lost the dramatic flocks of nearly a half-century ago, we still have Evening Grosbeaks as an uncommon boreal forest breeder and a very occasional visitor to our feeders. Surprisingly, significantly more forest breeding pairs were found during the fieldwork of the second Vermont Breeding Bird Atlas from 2003 to 2007 than during the first atlas 25 years previously. The mountainous backbone of the state had the most breeding pairs during both atlases; the second atlas showed the greatest increase in the southern Vermont piedmont. The Champlain Valley was the only area to lose pairs. Evening Grosbeaks are well established now as a Vermont



Evening Grosbeak photo by Cephas

Evening Grosbeaks’ use of cherries is worth a second look. They carefully remove, and reject, the cherry flesh from around the hard pit, then crack the pit in their powerful bill and swallow it. They appear to be unphased by the presence of hydrogen cyanide in the pit.

breeding species in boreal forest. Gone are the days of the raucous Evening Grosbeak mobs at our feeders. Their decline from peak abundance was ultimately the result of a decline of a predictable protein-rich food source, spruce budworms, due to effective pesticide treatment of evergreens. The new reality is Evening Grosbeak as an occasional visitor, especially for those of us living at the edge of the mountains. 🐾



*In 2016, OCAS board member and wildlife photographer Tyler Pockette solicited money for OCAS scholarships by photographing as many Vermont birds as he could find.*

## 2016 VT Photo Big Year by Tyler Pockette

After 366 days of searching the state with my camera for as many bird species as possible, I photographed my last species on December 27th; a rare Lesser Black-backed Gull on Lake Dunmore. This was bird species number 259 that I photographed for the year, far exceeding my

original target of 240. Donations trickled in throughout the year, and after the final pledges arrived, we raised \$2,350 to give two students scholarships to attend the Hog Island Audubon camp off the coast of Maine. It was a busy year, but the results were well worth the effort! 🐾

American Bittern in Vermont Photo by Tyler Pockette



## OCAS Calendar of Events February – May 2017

**FRI., FEBRUARY 17**      **GREAT BACKYARD BIRD COUNT.**  
to **MON., FEBRUARY 20**      See article this issue, page 1, and  
www.birdcount.org.

**MON., MARCH 20**      **2017 SALAMANDER ESCORTS.**  
to **SUN., APRIL 9**      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.*

**SUN., MAY 7**      **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.

**SUN., MAY 7**      **OTTER CREEK AUDUBON**  
to **SUN., MAY 21**      **BIRDATHON.** See further informa-  
tion in the May 2017 *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.

**SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 11, 8–10 AM**  
**SATURDAY, MARCH 11, 8–10 AM**  
**SATURDAY, APRIL 8, 8–10 AM**  
**SATURDAY, MAY 13, 7–9 AM**

### EIGHTH ANNUAL CABIN FEVER LECTURE SERIES (SECOND THURSDAYS, JANUARY - MARCH) DOWNSTAIRS AT ILSLEY LIBRARY, 75 MAIN ST. MIDDLEBURY

**THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 7 PM:**      **THE BIRDS OF TAIWAN**  
Hank Kaestner, who has over 7000 birds on his life list, tells us about bird life in Taiwan.

**THURSDAY, MARCH 9, 7 PM:**  
**WILD UTAH: AMERICA'S REDROCK WILDERNESS**  
Travis Hammill, Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, speaks about protecting the iconic redrock lands of southern Utah for recreation and preservation.



**Black & White Warbler in Vermont**  
Photo by Tyler Pockette

## Addison County Christmas Bird Counts

On 17 December the 57<sup>th</sup> Ferrisburgh count had 37 field birders and 3 feeder watchers, who combined to find a total of 16,927 birds of 74 species, four below the average count for the last decade. Lake Champlain was open, but Otter Creek and ponds were frozen. The morning brought snow; the afternoon was sunny. No birds were new to the list. Record numbers were tallied for Red-bellied Woodpecker (47), Peregrine Falcon (5), Dark-eyed Junco (970), White-throated Sparrow (27). Numbers of Red-winged Blackbirds (30) were exceeded only once previously, in 1967. Observers found 16 waterfowl species. Birds represented by one individual each included Wood Duck, Ring-necked Duck, Ring-necked Pheasant, Belted Kingfisher, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Northern Mockingbird, White-crowned Sparrow, Rusty Blackbird (only the third time on the count) and Pine Siskin (the sole northern finch). Unusually low numbers of Downy Woodpecker (60), House Finch (75), White-breasted Nuthatch (80) and Red-breasted Nuthatch (1) were recorded.

Also on 17 December, 20 field birders and feeder watchers of the Mt. Abraham count identified 1772 birds of 52 species. Bristol Pond and other ponds were frozen; a spring-fed stream and fast moving streams were running. Morning snow changed to afternoon sleet and snow. No birds were new to the list. Only one waterbird, Great Blue Heron, was observed. Unusual sightings included American Kestrel, Peregrine Falcon (2), Carolina Wren (2), Field Sparrow, Pine Siskin (13). Four Red-bellied Woodpeckers were seen. The species is now considered regular on the Mt. Abe count. Unusually high numbers included American Robin (156), White-throated Sparrow (3), Hairy Woodpecker (32).

On 18 December the Middlebury count had 43 field birders and a number of feeder watchers, who combined to identify a total of 24,073 birds of 72 species, two species below the record for the 15-mile diameter count circle. Lake Champlain and most ponds were frozen, reducing the potential for waterbirds although 6 duck species, 2 goose species and a Great Blue Heron were spotted. Birds new to the list included Black Scoter and Marsh Wren. Record numbers were 15 Bald Eagles, 798 Dark-eyed Juncos, 5677 American Robins and 50 Red-bellied Woodpeckers. Only one individual Long-tailed Duck, Goshawk, Merlin, Peregrine, Ruffed Grouse, Short-eared and Saw Whet Owl, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Northern Shrike, Red-bellied Nuthatch, Hermit Thrush, White-crowned Sparrow and Purple Finch were found. None of the six winter finch species were present, although normal numbers of other winter visitors, Horned Lark, Snow Bunting, Lapland Longspur and Northern Shrike, were found. 🐾

# Black Vultures Moving In

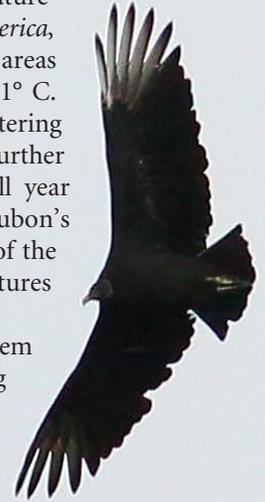
By Ron Payne

**B**lack Vulture, cousin to the locally common Turkey Vulture, seems to be the latest in a string of species moving northward and taking up residence in our area. Lately there have been more numerous reports of these large birds with bare black heads, black bodies, black wings with silver primaries, and short wedge-shaped tails cruising overhead in our region. In the past there were only sporadic sightings of these birds in the area. They were considered vagrants that had overshot their migration, but now they appear to have truly arrived. The turning point for this may have come in 2015-2016 when a group of Black Vultures overwintered in the Ticonderoga, NY area. Consistent sightings of them foraging for food at Middlebury College's composting site on South Street in late summer and fall supports this idea, as does a sighting of them perching atop the old Courthouse in downtown Middlebury this past December.

Black Vultures are a very successful species, ranging from the eastern United States down to all but the southernmost reaches of Argentina and Chile. They are mostly non-migratory. The northern limit

of their range is believed to be very temperature dependent. According to *Birds of North America*, they are generally not found overwintering in areas where the January average low dips below  $-1^{\circ}$  C. As climate change progresses suitable wintering temperatures for Black Vultures will creep further north, increasing the potential for their full year residence in our region. In National Audubon's climate change report, Black Vulture is one of the few species that benefit from rising temperatures by increasing their range.

So far as I know there are no reports of them nesting this far north, but that is something we may see in the not too distant future. Finding their nests is facilitated by their tendency to perch near a nest site for weeks before commencing egg-laying. Being seen doing this near caves, rocky crevices, tree cavities, hollow logs, and even abandoned/disused buildings might be the first sign of their intent to breed here. 🐾



**Black Vulture** photo by Tyler Pockette

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Otter Creek Audubon Society

PO Box 938

Middlebury, VT 05753