



Otter Tracks

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Red-bellied Woodpeckers in the Champlain Valley

by Warren King



The Red-bellied Woodpecker is moving north with the warming climate. The first one was seen in Vermont in 1971. Numbers increased very slowly; breeding was first documented in 2001. The species is most abundant at lower elevations in the Champlain Valley, and less so in the lower Connecticut River valley. It has been referred to as “slightly migratory”, because it moves a short distance south into southern New England and New York in response to unusually cold weather.

The Middlebury and Ferrisburgh Christmas Bird Counts provide good evidence of the gradual increase in winter numbers of the species. The Middlebury Count had its first Red-bellied in 1989, 3 in 1999, and 2 in 2002. The Ferrisburgh Count had one in 1971 and 3 each in 2003 and 2004. Thereafter, numbers increased quickly. Five-year averages from the Middlebury Count showed 12 per year from 2005 to 2009, 32 per year from 2010 to 2014, and 52 per year from 2015 to 2019. Similarly, five-year averages from the Ferrisburgh Count showed 8 per year from 2005 to 2009, 22 per year from 2010 to 2014, and 45 per year from 2015 to 2019. Middlebury’s peak was 76 in 2018; Ferrisburgh’s peak was 54 in 2019.

Vermont eBird shows records of Red-bellied Woodpeckers primarily in the Champlain Valley up to and beyond the Quebec border, becoming less frequent north of Burlington and

A pair of Red-bellied Woodpeckers working on their nest cavity Photo by Bruce Johnson

across higher ground toward the Connecticut River. Records increase to a lesser extent along the Connecticut River.

Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers occur widely in Vermont and might be expected to compete with Red-bellied Woodpeckers for food or nest cavities. Hairy is the largest of the three, up to 90 grams, then Red-bellied at 70 grams, and Downy the smallest at 30 grams. I find no mention of interspecific competition in the publications available to me, but there is the suggestion of competition between Hairys and Red-bellieds in the trends of numbers of the two species in the Middlebury and Ferrisburgh Christmas Bird Counts. Downy numbers have remained stable since Red-bellieds have become abundant. But Hairy numbers have declined slightly, dropping from 47 per 5-year average from 2004-2009 to 46 per 5-year average from 2010 to 2014, and 40 per 5-year average from 2015 to 2019. During these same periods Red-bellieds increased from 8 per 5-year period to 22 to 5-year period to 45 per 5-year period. 🐾



OCAS Mission:
To protect birds, other wildlife and their habitats by encouraging a culture of conservation within Addison County.

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Order Out of Chaos?

Editorial by
Warren King



VIEWPOINT

In the 1963, fresh out of college, I joined a project organized by the Smithsonian Institution to study seabirds in the central Pacific Ocean. Five years of field work based in Honolulu was followed by two years in Washington D.C. writing up the data for publication. Although most of my fieldwork involved making systematic observations of seabirds at sea, I also enjoyed a few months banding birds in seabird nesting colonies on obscure tropical Pacific islands. Over those five years, 64 of us banded hundreds of thousands of birds. One of my colleagues was Brian Harrington, now retired from Manomet Observatory. In 1996, Brian wrote a book, *Flight of the Red Knot*, mainly about that species but also about other birds. In it, he drew conclusions from part of his seabird banding experience in the '60's. His conclusions gave me a different perspective on seabirds than I had had most of my time in the Pacific and indeed until I read his book.

As part of the seabird program Harrington spent a period of time on Laysan Island in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands where he banded Sooty Terns and other seabirds on successive visits over two years. At that time the Sooty Tern population on Laysan was thought to number about one million birds, one of several tropical Pacific islands with populations of a million or more birds.

Sooty Terns are the most abundant seabird species in the tropical Pacific. The raucous calls of huge numbers of terns coming from and flying to their nest scrapes create a sense of deafening cacophony. They nest in dense colonies, with nest scrapes only two or three feet apart. They are best banded at night; a headlamp shining in the eyes of a nesting bird allows it to be picked up and banded with no ill effects to the bird.

During his second year, Brian unknowingly followed the same route through the colony he'd taken the previous year. At one point, he picked up a bird to band and found that it was already banded and that it had a number that he had used the year before. Even though a few thousand birds had been banded that first year, he assumed that the odds of his finding one of his banded birds were slim, given the size of the colony and the deafening disarray of birds coming and going in a constant turmoil. He recorded the band number and reached for the next bird, which, to his great surprise, he had also banded the previous year. The next bird he picked up also had a band, one number in sequence above the previous one. The next bird also had a band one number above the previous one. The odds at this point of finding four birds already banded and with numbers one apart from each other were astronomical. Just then a bird of a different species, with speckled brown feathers, a shorebird with long legs, moved quickly beyond his reach. He shone the light in its eyes and managed to capture it. It was also banded. It was the fifth in the sequence. He recalled then that he had captured and banded a Pacific Golden Plover the previous year. Golden Plovers overwinter in modest numbers on tropical Pacific islands but breed on Alaska's north slope.

Brian realized that what he had just experienced was against all odds. The only explanation he could offer was that he had followed the same route two years in a row. That reduced the odds slightly, but in the intervening year the Sooty Terns had been at sea flying constantly on a route that took them west 4000 miles to the seas off of the Philippines and Japan and 4000 miles back to Laysan, while the Golden Plover had flown north 3000 miles to the Pacific North Slope, where it bred, and 3000 miles back to Laysan. Neither species has waterproof plumage; neither can rest on the sea surface. Both species demonstrate extreme site fidelity. What they gain from this highly stressful migratory behavior is not entirely clear, except that it has successfully permitted them to continue the existence of their species. Brian concluded that most of the birds in the Laysan Sooty Tern colony, rather than forming a massive flock in disarray, were aware, precisely, where they belong, whether there is a visible E911 sign announcing their place or not. The chaos we perceive is due to our failure to account for data at a different level, which, except for the greatest chance, we have no idea even exists. 🐾

New Partnerships for the Birds

The Vermont Center for Ecostudies in Norwich VT is working with Audubon Vermont, headquartered in Huntington, on projects that will advance bird conservation in Vermont. One project promotes protection of birds from “incidental take”, the traditional interpretation of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act that makes it illegal to “take” migratory birds, including actions leading to unintentional harm or death. The current federal administration is proposing deletion of “incidental take” from coverage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Power line electrocutions, wind tower impacts, oil waste pits, and expansive office building windows frequently cause inadvertent bird casualties. To counteract the removal of “incidental takes” deletion Congress is proposing a stand-alone bill, H.R. 5552, and the Vermont Legislature is proposing H.683. Both bills deserve strong support from all bird enthusiasts.

A second activity involves joint action of Audubon Vermont and the Vermont Center for Ecostudies, as well as the University of Vermont, Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation and the Vermont Sugarmakers Association. For more than a decade Audubon Vermont has employed forest management practices to improve forest habitats for tree species diversity and a variety of ecosystem services. For over a decade Audubon Vermont has advocated its Bird Friendly Maple Project, which employs forest management practices to improve forest habitats for tree species diversity and a variety of ecosystem services, rather than management to eliminate most or all trees other than sugar maples, a practice that has become increasingly prevalent in the last few years. Intensive forest management to promote sugar maples threatens the tree diversity and age class diversity that a range of birds require. This joint study will compare management for intentionally diverse forest habitat with maple monocultures and unmanaged forest stands. 🐾

Atrazine Back in the News

Atrazine is the second most used herbicide in the U.S. Annual use runs about 70 million pounds. It is used to control weeds on cornfields, sugarcane, sorghum, golf courses, lawns, road and railroad rights of way. It is often washed from agricultural soils by rain into groundwater and surface water and is frequently found in drinking water. It is a hormone disruptor in humans, both males and females, increasing the risk of cancer and contributing to shorter pregnancies, altered menstrual cycles and birth defects. It poses a chronic risk to plants, mammals, birds, amphibians and fish. Widespread Atrazine occurrence in wetlands may be a major cause of nationwide amphibian decline.

Atrazine use was banned in the European Union in 2004. Syngenta and



other agrochemical firms settled a class action lawsuit with 23 midwestern U.S. cities in 2012 for \$105 million but continue to manufacture and sell the product.

The EPA is in the process of terminating the monitoring of Atrazine in community drinking water systems. At the same time it is raising the concentration of Atrazine in use. There will then be no way to monitor Atrazine use in the U.S. 🐾

Letter to the Editor

April 22, 2020

My annual plea to keep both birds and cats safe got a boost on the NBC Evening News tonight! They reported that cats can become infected with the coronavirus. They had previously reported that a tiger at the Bronx Zoo had it but it's now known that any cat is susceptible. NBC suggested that cat owners keep their cats inside to keep them from becoming infected. Bird lovers have been begging cat owners to consider doing that for years. With bird numbers plummeting worldwide for multiple reasons including predation by both pet and feral cats, now might be a good time to make the switch. Keeping cats inside or teaching them to go out on a harness and leash would also help cats who are the animals most likely to end up in an animal shelter or be injured or killed by cars. I'm very aware that this is a hot-button topic but with the added boost from the national news I'm taking the risk of once more asking cat owners to consider making an effort to keep your cats inside or on a leash. An additional reason right now is that birds are beginning to nest and will soon be raising their families. Please don't let your cat harm them. Thanks for considering this.

- Dottie Nelson
Middlebury VT

Cornell Lab Education Newsletter Available

OCAS researched a new Cornell Lab of Ornithology online resource that was developed for parents and teachers to use during the school shutdown. Bird- and nature-themed activities, offered in a weekly eNewsletter, are geared to 3 different grade levels: K-2, 3-5, and 6-8. The program is entirely free; we found it to be very engaging and an excellent resource for kids. Addison Central School District has approved this resource, and highly recommends that teachers incorporate it into their weekly lessons. We're hoping it will inspire parents and kids to enjoy outdoor learning as part of their spring experiences. Anyone can sign up for this eNewsletter – just click on this bitly link <http://bit.ly/sciencenature>. 🐾



Major Bird Decline in Vermont

The November 2019 issue of *Otter Tracks* included an article entitled *Where Have All the Songbirds Gone*. The article summarized a report in the journal *Science* of the decline of North American bird species populations by 2.9 billion birds in the last 48 years. The authors, eleven ornithologists representing seven prominent science organizations or agencies, assessed changes in population of 529 North American bird species, three-quarters of the bird species breeding in North America. Of these 529 species, 303 declined. Lead author Ken Rosenberg, a senior scientist at American Bird Conservancy (ABC) and Cornell Lab of Ornithology, noted “This is the first analysis to look at the net changes in total population across North American species, and we see this staggering net loss in breeding birds, across all habitats, and including generalists.”

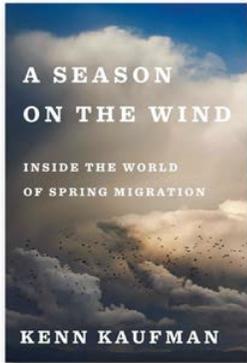
The following ten Vermont species are among the twenty species showing the largest declines between 1970 and 2017:

Species	Decline
Evening Grosbeak	90%
Bank Swallow	89%
Blackpoll Warbler	84%
House Sparrow	83%
Northern Bobwhite	83%
Herring Gull	81%
Ruddy Turnstone	80%
Pine Siskin	80%
Rusty Blackbird	79%
Eastern Meadowlark	79%

ABC has proposed five key threats to North American birds: habitat loss, climate change, pesticides, invasive species and collisions with windows, tall towers, power lines and wind turbines. Specific actions to deal with the threats include:

1. Make windows safer
2. Keep cats indoors
3. Reduce lawns by planting native species
4. Avoid pesticides
5. Drink bird-friendly coffee
6. Protect our planet from plastics, and
7. Get involved politically. 🐾

Book Review



A Season on the Wind: Inside the World of Spring Migration

by Kenn Kaufman

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt
2019, 282 pgs

Kenn Kaufman is an author of three books about birds in addition to the Peterson Field Guide to Advanced Birding, a reference book on North American birds, and eight volumes in the Kenn Kaufman Field Guide series. He is a field editor for Audubon Magazine. He received the American Birding Association’s Ludlow Griscom Award (1992) and American Birding Association’s Roger Tory Peterson Award (2008).

A Season on the Wind provides in-depth insights into the birding calendar at the most popular birding locality in the United States, the southwestern end of Lake Erie, just east of Toledo OH. Since there are multiple sites in one general area, if the birds aren’t congregating in one place, birders can find them in another. Kenn’s wife, Kim, is director of Black Swamp Bird Observatory, which along with nearby Magee Marsh

Wildlife Area, Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge, Maumee Bay State Park and several other birding areas make up this birding hotspot.

In his book, Kaufmann leads us on a non-stop bird walk through a typical year in the Magee Marsh area, culminating in the week around International Migratory Bird Day (IMBD) in May, when the throngs of birders reach a peak. In preparation for IMBD annually, he analyses weather reports to put together a forecast with its all-important implications for movement of the migrant birds and hopefully to the satisfaction of the thousands of birders coming to the area from around the U.S. and the world.

Kenn brings the woods and marshes of Magee Marsh and Black Swamp alive with perceptive anecdotes about the birds that have moved through the area and those that breed there. At the same time, he also takes us through a lawsuit filed by Black Swamp Bird Observatory and the American Bird Conservancy aimed at preventing erection of a “experimental” wind tower on the Camp Perry Military Reservation which is located in the middle of these numerous birding localities. The tension mounts as the wind power project is withdrawn, then resurrected a year later. The book is rich in information about birds, their habits and habitats. The author’s knack of expressing his observations on paper is appealing and satisfying.

Of course, Kaufmann’s 2019 book does not deal with the coronavirus. As of the writing of this review, all the observatories, wildlife areas and parks have been closed, all activities have been cancelled. The birds will be there in force again, just without an audience. 🐾

May – September 2020 OCAS Calendar of Events

SUNDAY, MAY 3 WARBLER WARM-UP. CANCELLED

SUNDAY, MAY 3.
TO SUNDAY, MAY 17 OCAS BIRDATHON. Our main fundraiser of the year. OCAS teams identify as many species as they can under social distancing and self-imposed rules in a 24-hour period. Supporters provide contributions per species or a lump-sum amount. See insert, this issue.

SATURDAY, MAY 16 8-10 AM HELP AUDUBON VERMONT'S MARK LABARR net and affix geolocators on Golden-winged Warblers at Middlebury's Wright Park. Joint event of Audubon Vermont, MALT and OCAS. Meet a few minutes before 8 AM at Wright Park entrance at end of Seymour Street Extension (turn right off Seymour Street just east of Pulp Mill covered bridge). For more information and to confirm event call Ron Payne at 388-6019 or check website.

SATURDAY, JUNE 6 8 PM MOTH EVENT AT ILSLEY LIBRARY, 75 Main Street, Middlebury. Enjoy the huge diversity and abundance of moths in Vermont with an outdoor black light session to see what moths are active in early summer. Local moth experts will be on hand to help us with moth identification and biology. Call Ron Payne at 388-6019 or check website to confirm event date and time.

SATURDAY, JUNE 20 9-11 AM BEGINNERS BIRD WALK. Jointly sponsored with MALT at Wright Park. Led by experienced naturalists. Meet at Wright Park (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). Call Carol Ramsayer at 989-7115 or check website to confirm date and time.

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: CANCELLED
SAT., JUNE 13, 7-9 AM CALL TO CONFIRM OR CHECK WEBSITE
SAT., JULY 11, 7-9 AM CALL TO CONFIRM OR CHECK WEBSITE
SAT., AUGUST 8, 7-9 AM CALL TO CONFIRM OR CHECK WEBSITE
SAT., SEPTEMBER 12, 7-9 AM CALL TO CONFIRM OR CHECK WEBSITE

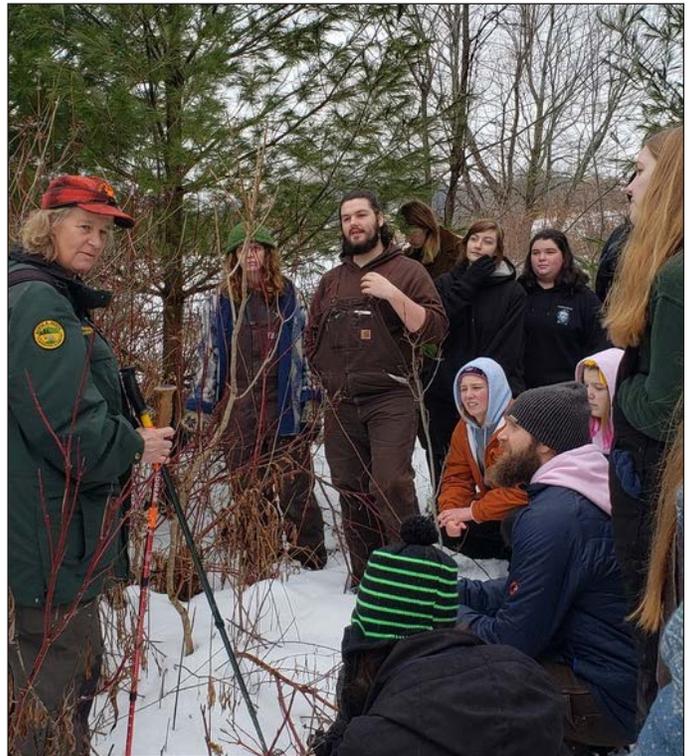
Anonymous Donor Matching Challenge

This year OCAS has a special opportunity to expand our Addison County educational grants thanks to an anonymous donor who has pledged to match up to \$4,000 in Birdathon donations. Historically with current funds, we have not been able to fully support all approved grants. This additional money will allow us to fully fund the approved grants. We are hoping for a successful Bird-a-thon as all money raised will be matched dollar for dollar up to \$4,000.00. This will allow us to maintain our high level of educational participation throughout Addison County.

Please read the flier included in this edition of *Otter Tracks* concerning the 2020 Bird-a-thon event. As a consequence of COVID-19, birding teams should consist solely of family groups. We will have to postpone the traditional potluck supper until there are appropriate circumstances for the event. 🐾

Change of Plans

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Susan Morse shares her knowledge and experience with Walden Project students photo by Rowan Kamman

ects if their circumstances have changed. We will be as flexible as we can to support our teachers in these difficult times. One grant has already been reallocated. Amy Clapp from Salisbury Community School requested that her grant funds be directed to a reprinting of her *Naturally Literate* checklist. Each student in the Addison Central School District (ACSD) will now have his or her own copy to enrich outdoor learning activities this spring. 🐾

A Change of Plans

by Carol Ramsayer

It was back in January 2020 when the first summary of the Environmental Education Grant season came in. Mary Hogan Elementary's first graders had enjoyed an outdoor day at Shelburne Farms, totally engaged in their "Active in Winter" program. Then came news from Orwell Village School. Vermont Institute of Natural Science (VINS) had visited with a host of live birds. All students gained a deeper appreciation for familiar raptors, and delved into several environmental issues. February brought a report from Willowell's Walden Project. High school students there had 2 opportunities to explore forests with renowned tracker Susan Morse – at Susan's Wolfrun property in Jericho and at Willowell's Monkton property. The year was off to an exciting start with 3 of the 20 grants already completed.

But suddenly the world changed. On Wednesday, March 18th, Vermont schools closed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic - the very day that OCAS volunteers were ready with a series of stations to support the Mary Hogan Elementary 4th grade migration project. Bird painting, stopover habitats, beak adaptations – all were put on hold. Student-created paper maché birds, that had looked forward to their suspended "spring migration" down the hallway, instead went home with disappointed students. Eventually the news came that education would continue online for the remainder of the school year.



Mary Hogan Elementary 1st graders explore making a shelter for a rabbit as part of Shelburne Farms "Active in Winter" program photo by Melissa Flint

With 17 of the 20 grants unused, OCAS has decided to roll over these remaining funds into the 2020-2021 school year. In September, teachers will have the choice to either reschedule their grant-funded events and projects, or to reapply for different proj-

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